

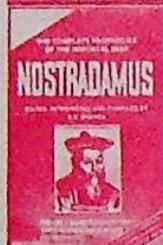
FAST AND FESTIVALS OF INDIA



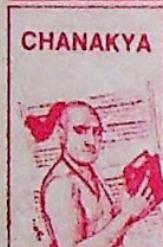
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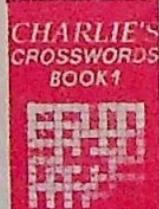
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Fasts and Festivals of India

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Introduction

THE Hindu festivals, fasts, rituals, holy baths and the observance of sacred days are part and parcel of great cultural heritage of India. They are deeply religious and social and a great source of spiritual and moral enrichment. They also lend zest, variety, colour and grandeur to an otherwise insipid, routine and care-worn day to-day human existence. The Hindu festivals are more than what they appear to be. They are essentially a way of living and thinking in the course of existence, and as such bring their whole weight to bear on the individual and the society.

Not unlike the deities of the Hindu pantheon, they are numerous and frequent, but basically religious, psychological and intimately connected with the coming of the seasons, though many of them have lost the history of their origin in the mists of hoary past. With the passage of time they have undergone a process of transformation and evolution and many new festivals have been grafted upon the old ones.

A Hindu festival is generally characterized by fasting, ablutions, prayer, worship, austerities, vigils, vows, offerings to the gods and holy persons and such other activities of piety and devotion. It may be again repeated and underlined that a Hindu festival is more than a 'festival'. It is cathartic in nature, and as a means of purification strengthens the spirit within. They are an object lesson in finding enjoyment through renunciation and self-denial. They are an exploration in the enjoyment of things without being bound and obsessed by them.

Reality is one, but it has many forms and names in relation to its multifarious functions, attributes, aspects and the form

of fulfilment sought from it by the seeker. The same Reality becomes Brahma in its creative aspect, Vishnu in preservation, Shiva in dissolution, Lakshmi or Sri in benignity, Kali or Durga as a fierce female energy and so on. Has not Lord Krishna in Gita said :

"I am the ritual, I am the sacrifice, the oblation, and the herb. I am the prayer and the melted butter, the fire and its offering."

"Even those who are devotees of other gods if they worship with faith, are sacrificing to me alone, though not adhering to the rule."

There are different ways to fulfilment of salvation and spiritual evolution. The Upnishadas advocate the path of knowledge and wisdom. Bhakti or devotion is another, and far more easy, smooth and open to the masses. In bhakti the worldly life is not an obstacle. Bhakti is based on, and inspired by both love and reverence towards the object of devotion or God. A devotee craves for the divine grace and indulges in worship, prayer, chanting of his names, praising his glory, fasting, and such other ritual observances to achieve it. A bhakta lives passionately all his conceivable relation with the godhead, the immanent reality alone. For him He is father, mother, brother, friend, beloved, wife, family, refuge, teacher, master, kinsmen and what not.

The fast as a religious vow, observance and practice, comprising abstinence from all sensual gratification, is an austerity or tapas. The spiritual powers developed through devotion and tapas are all too well-known. The Puranas tell us how alarmed by the penances of the yogis and rishis, Indra would send beautiful nymphs, par excellence, to inspire in them passions and disturb their devotion. It is through tapas, penance and contemplation that Brahma created the world, Indra achi-

eved the lordship of the heaven, Parvati got Shiva as her consort, Shiva became the lord of all animate and inanimate objects, and Vishnu the preserver of all things. A fast as a religious observance is the best form of austerity for the masses and the householders.

Fasting helps in concentration, contemplation, overcoming the passions, controlling the senses and in overhauling our various body systems. Fasting as a means of spiritual development, purification and self-discipline has been a time honoured religious practice since times immemorial. It cleanses the various human organs and rejuvenates the body by eliminating toxins. It provides rest and relaxation to the digestive system and opens the new avenues of growth by realising the spiritual energy. The women folk in India are relatively fewer than men, but they live and last longer, and one of its secrets is that they are more religious, devout and resort to fasts frequently. A fast, when coupled with piety and devotion, becomes a tremendous force, leading to a marked physical, mental and spiritual development. In these days of strain and stress, the importance of fasting accompanied by prayer, worship, contemplation and such other acts of piety and devotion can hardly be overemphasized. Thus, a fast can become a definite milestone on the path of perfection if undertaken in right spirit.

Fasting starves the disease and deficiency and nourishes the aspirant. It is not starving but a sure way to remain alert, trim and slim. Occasional abstinence from food helps a lot in overcoming overweight and obesity. It is a sure way of rest, repair and getting rid of accumulated wastes. Animals in the wild, and even in captivity, stop eating when not well or hurt. A lot of energy is spent in digesting food. By abstaining from food we can conserve and release this energy for higher,

spiritual attainments and self-healing. Observe fast and remain physically, mentally and spiritually alert and beautiful. A weekly fast is sure to refresh, strengthen and improve your health and metabolism.

In this regard once Leo Tolstoy beautifully remarked, "To eat when one is hungry, drink water when one is thirsty, these are great pleasures of the body, but to refuse food and drink and everything the body desires is more than a pleasure, it is the joy of the soul". Fasting is neither starvation, nor affection, nor an outward observance; nor it is to be confused with dieting. The purpose of fasting is far higher and nobler, and the results highly rewarding. Fasting is a religious way of living and thinking. Mahatma Gandhi was a great devout and religious man, and he has been an outstanding example of fasting in our times. He fasted many times and for long durations, but we should not try to emulate Gandhi in this respect and be modest and balanced.

The Hindu month is divided into two fortnights or Pakshas, and 30 lunar days or "tithis". These 30 lunar days are roughly equivalent to $29\frac{1}{2}$ solar days. The first fortnight, i.e., the Shukla Paksha (Sudi) or the bright fortnight begins with the new moon. The dark fortnight or the Krishna Paksha (Badi) begins and ends with the full moon. The moon affords convenient punctuations for timing the Hindu religious observances and sacred days and tithis. According to Vishnu Purana Brahma, the Great Creator made the Moon, the monarch of all the planets, herbs, sacrifices and austerities. Each tithi or lunar day of the 15 phases of the moon has its special significance, and marks the appropriateness for a particular ceremony or observance.

As the 12 lunar months make only 354 solar days so there is an "adhik mas" or extra month after every 30 lunar months.

This leap month is generally either after Ashadha or Shravana, and is known as second (dvitiya) Ashadha or Shravana. The Hindu new year begins with Chaitra (March-April). The 12 months of the Hindu Calendar are as under :

1.	Chaitra	March-April
2	Vaisakha	April-May
3.	Jyaishtha	May-June
4.	Ashadha	June-July
5.	Shravana	July-August
6.	Bhadrapada	August-September
7.	Ashvina	September-October
8.	Kartika	October-November
9.	Margsirsai/ Agrahayana	November-December
10.	Pausa	December-January
11.	Magha	January-February
12.	Phaigun	February-March

The 15 days of both the bright and dark fortnights of each month are called :

Pratipada	the first day of a lunar fortnight
Dvitiya	the second day of a lunar fortnight
Tritiya	the third day of a lunar fortnight
Chaturthi	the fourth day of a lunar fortnight
Panchami	the fifth day of a lunar fortnight
Shashti	the sixth day of a lunar fortnight
Saptami	the seventh day of a lunar fortnight
Ashtmi	the eighth day of a lunar fortnight
Navami	the ninth day of a lunar fortnight
Dashami	the tenth day of a lunar fortnight
Ekadashi	the eleventh day of a lunar fortnight
Dvadashi	the twelfth day of a lunar fortnight
Trayodashi	the thirteenth day of a lunar fortnight

Chaturdashi	the fourteenth day of a lunar fortnight
Purnima	the fifteenth day of the bright fortnight
Amavasya	the fifteenth day of the dark fortnight

According to the Hindu almanac there are six Ritus or Seasons. A group of two months mark a Season. The six Seasons are :

1. Vasanta	:	Spring	:	March-May
2. Grishma	:	Summer	:	May-July
3. Varsha	:	Rains	:	July-September
4. Sharad	:	Autumn	:	September-November
5. Hemanta	:	Winter	:	November-January
6. Sishira	:	Cool Season	:	January-March

The Aryans were the great practisers of penances and at the same time no less pleasure-seekers. They achieved a golden mean between the seemingly two opposites and extremes, and this ideal can be seen enshrined in the Gita :

"Yoga is not possible for him who eats too much or for him who abstains too much from eating; it is not for him, O Arjuna, who sleeps too much or too little".

"For him who is moderate in eating and recreation, temperate in his actions, who is regulated in sleep and wakefulness, yoga becomes the destroyer of pain".

The Aryans performed sacrifices, took sacred baths, and observed fasts with a view to achieving spiritual purification and strength. They turned every possible opportunity into observance of fasts, rituals, worship and at their termination enjoyed grand feasts and festivities. The Vedic literature is full of references to dance and musical recitals, chariot races, and also gambling as a means of recreation. On festi-

vals, they performed sacrifices, did prayers to the various deities, drank Soma-rasa and enjoyed to their hearts content

In the epic days of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata this tradition of fasting and festivals continued with a new fervour and devotion. For example, in the Ramayana we find Ayodhya being decorated like a bride at the time of Rama's Coronation, which was not to be. All the highways were swept, watered and scented, garlands hung on every gate and flags streamed. The citizens feasted their eyes and ears on festive dancing and songs and the people reared up lamp posts in the shape of trees and Ayodhya resembling like a heavenly city, became loud with the cheers and the noise of the outsiders that began to pour in the city. In the meanwhile Rama and Sita remained on fast and night vigil, sat on the grass on the bare floor, worshipped Narayana and offered oblation with clarified butter into sacrificial fire.

These festivals, fasts and ceremonial observations did not begin all of a sudden. They all are rooted in certain traditions and ideals which have left deep impressions on our culture and civilization. Their observance by the masses throughout the length and the breadth of the country and even in some foreign lands, mark our cultural affinity, emotional integration, common ethos, points of contacts and bonds of unity in diversity.

Hindu Pantheon is believed to consist of 33 crore (330 million) Devi-devatas. They include both local and universal gods and goddesses. Every city, place and village in India has its own presiding and patron deity, who shares the joys and sorrows of his devotees. Each day, each season in India has a host of festivals to offer, each with a difference and

speciality of its own. On these days generally work is suspended, and fasts are observed, feasts organised, the houses decorated, the best clothes and jewels are worn and austerities and other acts of piety and devotion are done. It is well nigh impossible here to enumerate all of these, but there are certain festivals, fasts, feasts and rituals which stand out prominently, and they are being narrated in the following pages.

I. Vasanta : Chaitra-Vaisakha

SEASONS are spokes in the Wheel of Time. They are the foundation and basis of the changes in nature. Thus, they occupy a special significance in our life. As such, Seasons may be called the unique gift of the Mother Earth to mankind and other living beings. We all are of the earth and earthy. Everything here is for our enjoyment. The seasons come and go with a marked regularity. Everything on this earth is seasonal, and so are our festivals, fasts and auspicious days and feasts. Seasons bring them in their trains with unfailing punctuality.

Every season is a change, a fresh beginning, a new hope and a happy transformation. A Vedic hymn beautifully under-lines their significance and relation to men :

"Your circling seasons, years, nights succeeding days,
Your summer, O Earth, your splashing rains, your autumn,
Your winter and frosty season yielding to spring,
May each and all produce for us their milk."

The Hindu Year begins with Spring. The months of Chaitra and Vaisakha form the Spring proper. Chaitra is called so because during this month, the moon stands in the Constellation of Chaitra on the full moon day. All the other eleven months are named after the constellation in which the moon stands on Purnima. During Chaitra-Vaisakha the nature is in full bloom and the Season is at its best. Vasanta has rightly been designa-

ted the King of Seasons. Vasanta is also a close associate of Kam Deva (Cupid).

Kalidas, the prince of Sanskrit poets, waxes eloquent in describing the charms of Spring, in his so famous a poem called "Seasons".

Their blossom—burden weights the trees;

The winds in fragrance move;

The lakes are bright with lotuses,

The woman bright with love ;

The days are soft, the evenings clear

And charming; everything

That moves and lives and blossoms, dear,

Is sweeter in the spring.

The groves are beautifully bright

For many and many a mile

With Jasmine-flowers that are as white

As loving women's smile;

The resolution of a saint

Might well be tried by this;

For more, young hearts that fancies paint

With dreams of loving bliss.

(Translated by A.W. Ryder)

Our fairs, fasts, festivals, feasts and religious observance are intimately connected with the advent and termination of the seasons. In Spring we have many important celebrations and observances. They include Gangaur, Ramnavami, Mahavir Jayanti, Baisakhi, Buddha Purnima, Pooram and many others. These festivals, fasts and sacred days cut across all boundaries in their popularity, mass appeal and kaleidoscopic view.

GUDI PADVA

Gudi Padva is mainly celebrated in Maharashtra on the first day of Chaitra (March-April). Chaitra Pratipada marks the beginning of the Hindu New Year. People get up early in the morning, tidy up their houses, have ablutions and wear festive and new clothes. Women decorate their houses with Rangolis. A silk banner is raised and worshipped and then greetings and sweets are exchanged.

UGADI PARVA

The Ugadi Parva ushers in the New Year for the people in Andhra. On the first day of the Chaitra month this festival is observed with gay abundance and people visit one another, enjoy feasts and wear new clothes. It being an auspicious day new ventures are started. The festive day begins with ritual bath and prayers, and continues till late night. The purohita makes predictions by reading his almanac on this Telugu New Year Day. It is believed that Brahma created the world on this very day. Lord Vishnu is also said to have incarnated himself as Matsya (the Fish Incarnation) on this day. Brahma is especially worshipped on this day.

GANGAUR

It is primarily a women's festival, and is celebrated on the third day of the bright half of Chaitra (March-April). It is a great local festival in Rajasthan, and is also celebrated in many parts of northern India with great fervour. Gangaur is actually a 18-day festival culminating on the final day. The celebrations start right from the next day of Holi with worship and offerings to Gauri. Gauri is the most fair and benign aspect of Parvati, the consort of Shiva.

Both the married women and unmarried girls worship the goddess every day during the festival with durva grass, flowers, fruits and bright brass pots filled with fresh water. The married women seek Gauri's blessings for faithful conjugal happiness and bliss, while the virgins pray for a suitable handsome husband and future marital prosperity.

In the Ramcharitra Manas we find Sita coming to the shrine of Girija or Gauri early in the morning, accompanied by her lovely companions and attendants singing glad songs. After ablutions, Sita approaches the goddess with a cheerful heart and a contemplative mind, and after adoration paid with much devotion, she begs to Gauri a handsome and well matched bridegroom. And finally her wish is fulfilled when Rama wins her hand in marriage.

On the final day of Gangaur festival, the ladies keep strict fast, worship the goddess, wear colourful raiments and ornaments, exchange sweets, and the wooden or earthen images of Gangaur (Shiva-Parvati) are taken in procession through the main bazaars and streets to the accompaniment of music for the ceremonial immersion in the nearby lake or tank.

SHITALA ASHTAMI

Shitala Ashtami, as the name itself indicates, is observed on the eighth day of the bright half of Chaitra (March-April) to honour goddess Shitala. She is the goddess of smallpox and her blessings are invoked for protection against this evil. Shitala is depicted as roaming the countryside riding an ass. She is to be identified with Devi or Durga in her role as goddess of smallpox. On this day, which is either on Monday or Friday, the women folk visit the Shitala shrine in the morning, after ablutions, and offer rice, home-made sweet

cooked food and holy water mixed with milk. At several places colourful fairs are held on this occasion near the shrine of Shitala and there is a lot of merry-making, songs, dance, feasting and brisk buying and selling.

ASHOKASTAMI

Chaitra Shukla Ashtami is also celebrated as Ashokastami in Orissa. A Car Festival of Lingaraja at Bhubaneshwar is held on the pattern of the Car Festival of Lord Jagannath at Puri. The Protege of Lord Lingaraja is taken out in a giant wooden chariot to Rameshwar Temple, about 2 kms. from the Lingaraja Temple and returned after a four-day stay there. It is a major local festival and witnessed by thousands of devotees and spectators.

RAMANAVAMI

Ramanavami or the birthday of Lord Rama is a major Hindu festival celebrated all over the country by devout Hindus both Vaishnavas and Shaivas. Rama, the seventh incarnation of Vishnu was born on the ninth day of the bright half of the Chaitra (March-April) in Ayodhya, in the Treta Yuga, the Second Age. There is one God, desireless, formless, uncreated, True Being, Consciousness and Bliss, the supreme spirit, the all pervading, whose shadow is the world; who incarnates himself as Rama or Krishna and does many things, only for the love that he bears to his devotees; who in his mercy ever refrains from anger against those whom he loves and knows to be his own. Adi Kavi Balmiki in his celebrated Ramayana describes the advent of Rama thus:

"Then after the expiry of six seasons and on the completion of the twelfth month, on the ninth lunar day of the month of

Chaitra under the star Punarvasu, with the Sun, Mars, Saturn, Jupiter and Venus at Aries, Capricorn, Libra, Cancer and Pisces, and when the Moon with Jupiter entered Cancer of the Zodiac, Kaushalya gave birth to great and prosperous Rama with mighty arms, rosy eyes and scarlet lips, the joy of Dashratha and the adored of all people. He bore all auspicious marks on his fair body."

The Ramayana means the "Ways of Rama". It is held in the greatest possible reverence because it embodies the best of human ideals and a living sum of Indian character. As a popular religious epic and great literary work nothing can inspire and enthuse us more than the Ramayana. A verse in the end of Ramacharitra Manas reads:

"There is no age to compare the Age of Iron (Kaliyuga ; in it, if a man has only faith and devotes himself to praising Ram's spotless virtues, he escapes from the sea of birth and death without further trouble. Religion has been revealed with four feet; in the Iron Age one is of the most importance; to whomsoever God has given, let him practice alms-giving and prosper."

A fair idea of the Ramayana's immense popularity can be had from the fact that there are about 350 visions of it in Hindi alone, and the name of Rama, as "Ramal Ramal" or 'Ja Ramji kil', is a common form of salutation among the masses.

The Ramanavami festival offers to us all an opportunity to imbibe at least some of the ideals and spirit enshrined in the ways of Rama. On this great day Lord Rama is prayed to and worshipped, and it is the surest means to be able to follow in his ideals. One who approaches his lotus feet with love, devotion and humility becomes noble, large hearted, pious



peaceful, master of senses and beloved of the wise. On this sacred day you should observe fast and practice charities. You should visit a temple of Rama early in the morning after bath, etc. You can also make a small shrine at home and install a picture of Sri Rama-Panchayatan in it and offer prayers and puja.

In Ayodhya, the birth place of Sri Rama, great celebrations are there; the temples are decorated, Ramayana is read and recited and a grand fair is held. At other places also icons of Rama, along with Sita and Hanuman are richly adorned and worshipped and other acts of devotion and piety are observed. Chanting of the holy name of Rama, Sankirtanas and holding

of lectures and discourses on Rama's life and teachings, for the benefit of the audience, are a common feature of the celebrations. People take vow to devote themselves more to their spiritual and moral evolution on this occasion. Really, Ramnam is a great magic formula (mantra) and a wish-fulfilling tree (Kalpa Vriksha), and must be repeated, recited and meditated upon every now and then. Tulsidas has said that place the name of Rama on your tongue, like a jewelled lamp on the threshold of the door, and there will be light, as you will, both inside and out.

Ramanavmi is also celebrated as the Vasanta Navratri and the celebration starts from the first lunar day of the bright fortnight of Chaitra and lasts upto Ramanavami. On Ashtami Durga is worshipped. A fast is observed all the nine days and Durga-saptsati is read and an earthen pitcher filled with water is installed. Some fast only on the first and the last day of the period. Rama and Lakshmana had also performed worship to mother Durga before killing Ravana. If you wish to achieve anything worthwhile, seek the Mother's grace and it is a proper occasion. Ram and Devi, both symbolize the victory of good over the evil.

MAHAVIR JAYANTI

India has produced many great saints and spiritual leaders. The days commemorating the birthdays or the incidents in the lives of these great sons of the soil, are considered especially holy. The birthday of Lord Mahavira is observed by both the Digambara (sky-clad) and Svetambara (white-clad) Jains on the 13th day of the bright half of the Chaitra month (March-April). This birth anniversary is celebrated throughout the Jain world in the country, but it is celebrated with special charms in Raj-

asthan and Gujarat, where the Jains are relatively in greater number than in the other states. Jain pilgrims from all over the country congregate at the ancient Jaina shrines at Girnar and Palitana in Gujarat and at Mahavirji in Rajasthan. Pawapuri and Vaishali in Bihar are the other such centres. Vaishali being his birth place, a grand festival is held there, and it is known as Vaishali Mahotsava.

On this auspicious day grand chariot processions with the images of Mahavira are taken out, rich ceremonies in the temples are held, fasts and charities are observed, Jaina scriptures are read, and at some places grand fairs are set up.

Mahavira, the great teacher and the 24th Tirthankara of Jainism was contemporary of Lord Buddha. His mother Trisala or Priyakarini had a series of miraculous dreams heralding the birth of Mahavira. Vardhama achieved enlightenment under an Ashoka tree after two and a half days fasting and meditation. Then he stripped himself of all his clothes and wore none thereafter, but Svetambras believe that Indra then presented him a white robe. After his enlightenment he gave away all his wealth and possessions and owned nothing. Mahavira underlined the importance of austerity and complete non-violence as the essential means of spiritual evolution and salvation.

HANUMAN JAYANTI

On Chaitra Shukla Purnima, i.e., the full moon day of March-April, Hanuman Jayanti is celebrated all over the country. The monkey-God Hanuman is worshipped everywhere in India; either alone or together with Lord Rama. Hanuman temples of the entire length and breadth of the country. Every temple dedicated to Rama invariably has an idol of Hanuman. In other temples also Hanuman is found installed.

The birth anniversary of Hanuman, the son of the wind-god Maruti and Anjana Devi, is celebrated with great religious fervour. People visit the Hanuman shrines, observe strict



fast, offer prayers and puja, and read the Ramayana and the Hanuman Chalisa. On the occasion the idols of Hanuman is given a new coat of vermillion mixed with clarified butter and then richly decorated. Fairs are also held at some place near the shrines and charities done.

Hanuman is one of the greatest embodiments of strength, speed, agility, learning and selfless service to Lord Rama. He could fly at the speed of wind, uproot mountains and tree

assume any size and shape at will and make himself invisible. In the battlefield he was a terrifying figure, as colossus as a mountain, as tall as a tower and ever invincible. His face is red like ruby, his yellow skin and coat shines like molten gold and his mighty tail is of immense length. He shattered the enemies in the battlefield with his fierce roar. He is immortal, and this immortality was granted to him by Rama to serve the devotees in distress. His great adventures have been described in great detail and with much reverence and delight in the Ramayana.

He is a living embodiment of nishkam Karmayoga, love, sincerity and Ram-Nam. Rama and Hanuman are inseparable. His celibacy is of the highest order and he did things which were almost impossible for others for the sake of love of Lord Rama. On Hanuman Jayanti observe fast, meditate on him and his Lord Rama practice charity, read the Hanuman Chalisa and spend the day in repeating his glories and adventures and be blessed.

"We bow to Hanuman, who stand with his palms folded above his forehead, with a flood of tears flowing down his cheeks wherever the Names of Lord are sung".

CHITRAI FESTIVAL

In Madurai a great festival celebrating the marriage of Lord Sundareswara with fish-eyed goddess Meenakshi, is held with great religious enthusiasm in the month of Chaitra (March-April). It lasts for 10 days and centres on the Meenakshi Temple, an extraordinary example of the Dravidian architecture. The deities are taken several times around the temple in chariots. Thousands of devotees from all over India collect here on this occasion. The wedding anniversary is known as

Meenakshi-kalyanam, which is the most spectacular festival of Madurai.

The Meenakshi temple is said to have been founded originally by Indra himself. The legend goes that once Indra set out on a pilgrimage to expiate the misdeeds, he had done unawarely. During his pilgrimage when he came near Madurai, he felt the burden of his misdeeds taken off and he found a Shiva Lingam there. He ascribed this miracle to this Lingam and immediately constructed a temple there and enshrined the lingam. Then, he desired to perform a puja and so the Lord Shiva himself caused the golden lotuses to appear in the nearby pool. Indra was mightily pleased and that day was Chaitra Purnima. The golden lotus lake is still there in the temple premises.

CHAITRA PARB

Chaitra Parb is held on the full moon day of Chaitra month by the tribals in Orissa. It starts eight days preceding the Purnima. Throughout the celebrations the tribals observe fasting, and indulge in dancing and hunting. The head of the family pays homage to his fore-fathers in the presence of the village priest called "Jani", and every member of the family attends it in new festive costumes. Animal sacrifice is one of the main features of the festival. They start eating mangoes of the year only from this festival. Danda Nacha and Chaitighoda Nacha (two folk dance forms) are also performed on this occasion.

CHAITRA PURNIMA

The full moon day of Chaitra (March-April) is also observed as a sacred day to Chitra Gupta in South India. On this day Chitra Gupta, the assistant of Yamaraj, who keeps the accounts, is worshipped. It is Chitra Gupta who maintains the accounts,

of our good and bad actions in this world, and we are rewarded or punished accordingly hereafter. At Kanchipuram, near Madras, the image of god Chitra Gupta is taken out in a procession and the devotees have a holy dip in the River Chitra flowing down the nearby hills.

The worship and prayer offered to Chitra Gupta, the chief scribe of Yama, reminds us of the gods, high above, keeping a watch on our every action and maintaining a record of it. It helps us in self-analysis and maintaining a good conduct so as to reap good rewards and avoid punishment after death. It also reminds us that a sin can be forgiven if one repents sincerely, vows not to repeat it, and prays to the Lord with penitent heart, devotion and intense faith. The deity is also invoked in a metal or earthen pitcher filled with water, and is then offered worship and prayer with an elaborate ritual. Chitra Gupta literally means a "hidden picture" and it is he who presents a true picture of our actions after death.

AKSHYA TRITIYA

Akshya Tritiya fast and festival is observed on the third day of the bright half of Vaisakha. "Akshya" literally means undecaying or exempt from decay. The piety and devotion done on this day never decay and secure permanency. This day is also believed to be the first day of the Satya-yuga.

On this day fast is observed and Vishnu along with his consort Lakhmi is worshipped with holy Ganga water, tulsi (basil) leaves, incense, flowers, lamps, new raiments and naivadya. The brahmins are given foodgrains and other food stuffs in charity.

Bathing in the holy Ganga, or in some other waters on this day is also considered of high religious merit. It is on this

day that the portals of Sri Badrinarain, in the Himalayas, open after long snowy winter. Devotees worship Lord Badri on this day with food offerings, etc., in their houses and temples.

PARSHURAMA JAYANTI

Akshya Tritiya is also celebrated as Parshurama Jayanti by worshipping and praying to him. Parshurama or Rama with Axe, destroyed the wicked and evil-minded Kshatriya kings and princes 21 times, including Shasrabahu (thousand armed) Hai-haya King Arjuna, who had forcibly taken away the holy cow of his father Jamdagani out of arrogance. Tapas was his only wealth. He is also a great example of filial obedience, austerity, power and brahmanic ideals.

He was sixth incarnation of Vishnu and became manifest in the world in the beginning of the Treta Yuga mainly to terminate the tyranny of certain Kshatriya kings. His story has been told in the Mahabharata and the Puranas. He also appears in the Ramayana, as an adversary of Ramchandra, and challenges Ramchandra to a trial of strength, but finally he recognises Ramachandra's superiority and pays him homage, and retires to the Himalayas. The Malabar region on the Western Ghat, is believed to have been founded by him.

On this sacred day fasting, austerities, prayer and worship of Lord Vishnu are common highlights.

SHANKARACHARYA JAYANTI

The birth anniversary of Adi Shankaracharya is celebrated on the fifth of the bright half of Vaisakha in the South, but in north India it is on the tenth. He has been one of the greatest saint philosophers of India, and also symbolizes India's cultural and emotional integrity and unity.

His coming was a great boon and blessing to millions of Hindu souls, who were then groping in the darkness of ignorance and religious decay and disintegration. He is believed to be the incarnation of Shiva himself. He revived Brahmanism and took Vedanta philosophy to a new height. He is believed to have lived between A.D. 788 and 820, but according to tradition he flourished in 200 B.C. and was a native of Malabar, in Kerala. He worked many miracles and died at an early age of thirtytwo. He is the reputed author of many original philosophical works and commentaries on the Upnishadas, Vedanta Sutras and the Bhagvadgita. He has rightly been designated as our "Vedanta Guru". His philosophy is equally accessible both to the learned and the layman. He composed many beautiful hymns, and wanted people to devote themselves to God in any of his forms and incarnations.

Shankaracharya Jayanti is a fit occasion to study his works, to fast, to meditate and to rededicate ourselves to the service of the Lord and the country. His blessings in the form of his teachings are always with us.

JANAKI NAVAMI

The Janaki Navami fast is observed on the ninth day of the bright half of Vaisakha, as she is supposed to have sprung on this day from a furrow, while King Janaka was ploughing the field. Sita means a furrow. Janaka took her up and brought up as her own child. She is also called "A-Yonija", not born from the womb. She was actually Sri or goddess Lakshmi in human form, incarnated in the world for bringing about the destruction of Ravana and other demons. She reflects the best ideals of the Indian woman. As an embodiment of self-sacrifice, purity, tenderness, fidelity, conjugal affection and other conceivable female virtues, Sita is par excellence.

Some people believe that Sitaji appeared in the field of Janaka on the eighth day of the black half of Phalgun, and so they celebrate it on that day. However, observance of fast and offering of prayers and worship to mother Janaki on this auspicious day bestow upon the aspirants conjugal happiness, marital bliss and worldly prosperity.

BAISAKHI

Baisakhi festival derives its name from the month of Vaisakha (April-May) in which this day occurs. It invariably falls on the thirteenth of April every year. On this day people bathe in the sacred tanks, rivers, pools and on wells early in the morning, dress themselves in festive clothes, and visit shrines, temples and gurudwaras to offer prayers and worship.

It is a north Indian festival, but it is observed in Punjab with special enthusiasm and fervour. The people of Punjab perform bhangra dances, sing folk songs to the tune of rolling drums, exchange greetings, enjoy feasts and such other merry makings with gay abundance.

This also marks the beginning of a month long Vaisakha bathing. The pilgrimage to the only shrine of Badrinath, in the Himalayas, also commences from this day. The charities done during Vaisakha month are believed to earn great religious merit, and so people generously give money, grains and other things to the poor and needy and the brahmins, and observe fast, chant the glories of the Lord and practice such other pious activities.

NARSIMHA JAYANTI

Vishnu incarnated himself in the Narsimha or Man-Lion form on the fourteenth day of the bright half of Vaisakha. He did so to free the world and his devotees from the depredations of the

demon king Hiranyakasipu, who like his brother Hiranyaksh had got a boon of immunity from Brahma. He forbade prayer and worship to Lord Hari and substituted worship and prayer to himself. He was very much annoyed to discover his own son Prahlad as an ardent devotee of Vishnu. He tortured and tormented Prahlad to change his mind, but child Prahlad remained unmoved in his devotion to God. His father tried to kill Prahlad by trampling him under the elephants, by throwing him down the precipices, and by such other means but without any success.

One day Hiranyakasipu was so enraged that he rushed to kill Prahlad with his own sword, asking the child where was his saviour? Instantly Vishnu stepped out of a nearby pillar in the form of Narsimha, half lion, half man and tore Hiranyakasipu to pieces.

People fast on this auspicious day, meditate on Narsimha and seek his grace to have the devotion like that of Prahlad. In charity people give cows, grains, gold, robes, etc., to the poor and the brahmins according to their capacity. Narsimha symbolises omnipresence of God, his deep concern and love for the devotees, and also the victory of the good over the evil.

BUDDHA PURNIMA

Bhagwan Buddha was born at Lumbini near Nepal, attained enlightenment at Uruvela, near Bodh Gaya, in Bihar and finally moksha at Kusinagar, in the country of Mallas, now in Uttar Pradesh on the very same day, i.e., Vaisakh Purnima

(the full moon day of Vaisakha; April-May). The association of the same day with three great events of Buddha's life has made it the most important festival in the Buddhist world. It is celebrated all over the world with immense piety, devotion and fervour. Special celebrations are held at places like Sarnath, Sanchi, Kusinagar and Bodh Gaya. In the Deer

Park at Sarnath, near Varanasi, he for the first time preached and turned the Wheel of Dharma. At Sanchi some of his sacred remains are enshrined under a magnificent stupa. Buddha images and portraits are taken out in a procession, on this day. Devotees of Buddha recite and read their sacred scriptures, observe fast, worship Buddha at home and in temples, and practice charity.

We find that Buddha's teachings are more relevant today than they were ever before. He preached that this world is full of sorrows because of our attachment to things. Our sufferings are direct result of our desires. This results into reincarnations and a ceaseless chain of rebirths, suffering, sickness, old age and death, he said. Extinction of desire and attachment is essential for salvation, and the only way is to follow the Eight-fold Path : Right Belief, Right Intention, Right Word, Right Conduct, Right Living, Right Efforts, Right Thinking and Right Meditation. He underlined the importance of striking a balance



between indulgence and asceticism, and it is what most of the people badly need today.

CHANDAN YATRA

The summer festival of Lord Jagannath is celebrated with much religious zeal and passion at Puri in Orissa. The Chandan Yatra of Jagannath begins on Akshya Tritiya (the third day of the half of Vaisakha) falling in April-May and continues for nine days. Everyday the representative images of the deities are taken out in grand procession to nearby tanks where they are rowed in profusely decorated boats to the accompaniment of music and dance. On the last day of the celebrations Bhaunri is performed. This festival is also celebrated at Bhubaneshwar, Baripada and Balanga.

POORAM

The Pooram celebration in Vaisakha is a major festival at Ettumanoor. It is an annual important event. A great parade of richly caparisoned elephants carrying ceremonial umbrellas takes place on this occasion. They pass through the magnificent entrance-tower and line up in the open ground. On each elephant in the centre rides the temple deity Vadakkannasseri (Shiva). To the music of the pipes and trumpets the elephants go round the shrine, and at night a spectacular display of fireworks is there, which goes on till dawn.

II. Grishma : Jyaishtha-Ashadha

INDIA can boast of six seasons, while most other countries have simply four. For the Hindus the Seasons have been sacred, and they have frequently been personified, addressed in Mantras and hymns, and worshipped by libations in our ancient literature like Vedas, Mahabharata, etc. Seasons mark the appropriate time for sacrifices, worship, auspiciousness and other ceremonial activities. Jyaishtha and Ashadha are the two months of Grishma, or hot season. During Grishma, the whole Earth is engaged in tapas, as it were. During Jyaishtha the full moon stands in the constellation Jyaishtha, and during Ashadha in the constellation Ashadha. In the words of Kalidas:

Pitiless heat from heaven pours
By day, but nights are cool;
Continual bathing gently lowers
The water in the pool ;
The evening brings a charming peace:
For summer time is here.

The sunbeams like the fires are hot
That on the alter wake;
The enmity is quite forgot
Of peacock and of snake;
The peacock spares his ancient foe
For pluck and hunger fail;
He hides his burning head below
The shadow of the tail.

Beneath the garland of the rays
 That leave no corner cool,
 The water vanishes in haze
 And leaves muddy pool;
 The cobra does not hunt for food
 Nor heed the frog at all
 Who finds beneath the serpent's hood
 A sheltering parasol.

Man is Man in and with his Seasons. He has composed poems and hymns in praise of seasons. His environs and its science is sacred to him. The Summer months offer him the lift of such festival's as Vata Savitir, Ganga Dussehra, Nirjala kodashi, Ratha Yatra, Guru Purnima and others, when he with sense of beatitude reaffirms his faith and devotion in his creator by observing certain rituals, vows, feasts and festivities. is an expression of a music within, which, so well harmonizes with the universal symphony of creation without.

VATA SAVITRI

The fast of Vata Savitri is observed generally on the 13th day the dark fortnight of Jyaishtha, but at some places it is also served on Jyaishtha Purnima. It is meant only for the married men. The Hindu married women keep this vow for the sake ongevity and well-being of their husbands.

The story of Savitri and Satyavan is well-known. According the scriptures, Savitri, the daughter of King Aswapati, was lover of Satyavan, whom she married, though she was told by a seer that Satyavan had only one year to live. On stated day Satyavan went out to cut wood, and Savitri followed him like his own shadow. There Satyavan fell, dying to earth, and she, as she supported him, saw a figure, who told

her that he was Yama and he had come to fetch her husband's soul. Yama carried off his soul towards his abode of death, but Savitri followed him. Her devotion so pleased Yama, the god of death, that he had to finally restore her husband's life. Like Savitri it is the desire of every Hindu woman never to die as a widow.

Vata is a sacred tree among the Hindus. On that day Savitri had worshipped the Vata (Banyan tree). So, on this day women get up early in the morning and having bathed they go to worship the Vata in groups and in gay raiments. They ceremonially water the tree, sprinkle red powder on it, raw cotton threads are wrapped round its trunk, and then they go seven times round it to do parikrama.

On returning home they paint a Vata on the sanctified wall with turmeric powder and sandal and offer it prayer and worship. After breaking fast, fruits, clothes and such other articles are given in charity in a bamboo basket to the brahmins. They repeat the story of Satyavan-Savitri among themselves and pray for the prosperity and good health of their husbands.

JYAISHTHA ASHTAMI

This festival is celebrated on the 8th day of the bright half of Jyaishtha (May-June), at Khir Bhawani, in Kashmir. To celebrate this birthday festival of the goddess, people from the adjoining hill areas assemble in large number at the shrine and offer prayers and worships at the lotus feet of the goddess. Milk Khir (rice boiled in milk) is prepared on this day as naivaidya (food offering). The hill-folk sing hymns and songs in praise of Bhawani.

Khir Bhawani is the personal goddess of the Kashmir Hindus and hundreds of them visit the shrine daily. A beautiful marble shrine stands amidst a pool, formed by sp

waters, which change colours—rosy, red, turquoise green, lemon pale, sky blue, milky white or pure white from time to time. It is 25 kms. from Srinagar, and 5 kms. from Ganderbal.

GANGA DUSSEHRA

On the 10th day of the bright half of Jyaishthā, this festival is celebrated. On this tithi Ganga descended on the earth on Wednesday and in Hashta Nakhsatra. Literally Dussehra means that which takes away ten sins. People get up early in the morning and go to the Ganges to have a holy dip. When Ganga is not approachable because of distance, they bathe in some nearby tank, pool, river or the sea, chanting "Har Har Gange ! Har Har Gange !" Thus, they invoke Ganga, and offer their prayers and worship. At such places as Rishikesh, Hardwar, Har Mukteshwar, Prayag, Varanasi, etc., where Ganga flows, its banks are over crowded on this day. A bath in Ganga on this auspicious day is a great exercise in earning religious merit. It causes washing away of all the sins.

The very name of Ganga is sacred to the Hindus. Its water is kept in sealed pots in the homes, which never gets polluted even if it is kept for years together. The holy Ganga water thus kept is used on sacred days in sanctifying places and is taken as charnamrit. It is also given to the dying person with tulsi (basil) leaves to facilitate his leaving the body in peace. Ganga, the eldest daughter of Himavan and Mena, and sister of Parvati, was married to the gods in heaven, but was later brought down to the earth by great tapas of Bhagiratha, grandson of Sagara, the king of Ayodhya. Sagara of the famous solar race was a powerful king, but had no sons. Sagara propitiated Aurva and got a boon from him to the effect that he would have one son from his first wife Kesini, and 60 thousand from Sumati, the second wife.

Sagara decided to perform the Ashvamedha or the horse sacrifices as a sign of universal domain, and planned to dethrone Indra. But Indra drove the sacrificial horse to the nether worlds (Patal loka), although it was guarded by the 60 thousand sons. They reached there searching the horse and found it grazing near sage Kapila, seated in deep samadhi. They thought that Kapila had stolen their horse, they menaced him and disturbed his meditation. It enraged the rishi and he at once reduced them to ashes with his fierce glance.

Sagara now sent his grandson Anshuman to find out what had happened to his 60 thousand uncles. Anshuman approached Kapila with great humility and it pleased him so much that he granted him a boon to the effect that his uncles would be restored to life if the holy Ganges could be made to descend on earth and flow over the ashes of 60 thousand. Kapila allowed Anshuman to return with the horse and the Ashvamedha was completed.

Sagara, and his son Anshuman and then his grandson Dilipa, all practised great tapas in succession, but could not make Ganga come down to the earth, however, Bahgiratha, the son of Dilipa, proved a very powerful ascetic and he performed such an extraordinary tapas that Brahma had to order Ganga to descend to the earth.

Ganga came down to earth reluctantly and Shiva took her on his matted locks in order to avoid the danger of Ganga's fury. Ganga descended from the tangled locks of Shiva in seven streams, but it disturbed the sage Jahn in his meditations, and so, he in anger drank up the water, but relented and allowed it to flow from his ear. Hence, Ganga is also known as Jahnvi. Ganga followed the chariot of Bhagiratha and entered into the nether regions, where her sacred wash-

wed over the ashes of 60 thousand princes. It revived all the princes and they then ascended to the heaven. Thus Ganga is said to water the three worlds.

Besides Ganga Dussehra many other grand bathing festivals are held on the banks of Ganga. Many of our big and holy fairs are situated on its banks.

NIRJALA EKADASHI

Ekadashi is a very sacred day and so fast is observed on every eleventh day of the bright and dark half of the month. The seventh day of the moon is especially set apart for devotional exercises and fasting. It is a day dedicated to the worship of Vishnu. The Vishnu and Markandeya Puranas give detailed benefits flowing from the observance of Ekadashi Vratas and more. It is believed that Lord Vishnu transformed himself into Ekadashi to redeem the mankind from sins. It is a day of two days since it is looked upon as Lord Hari himself.

In all 24 Ekadashi fasts are observed in a year, but there are some Ekadashi which are relatively of greater significance. Nirjala Ekadashi is one of these. Not only complete fast is observed on this day (Jyaishtha Sudi 11) but even water is not taken at all. Both men and women observe strict fast and offer puja to Vishnu to ensure happiness, prosperity and forgiveness of transgressions and sins. On the preceding day it is on the 10th lunar day; Sandhya is performed and only a light meal is taken. In the evening Vishnu is worshipped, holding some durva grass in the hand. The night is spent in meditation and prayer. On Ekadashis rice-eating is totally prohibited.

During the Nirjala Ekadashi Panchamrata is prepared by mixing together milk, ghee, curds, honey and sugar, and then offered to the image of Vishnu or poured over the Shaligram.

Then, the deity is adorned with rich raiments, ornaments and jewels and a fan is placed beside it. Then Vishnu is meditated upon as the Supreme Lord of the Universe and puja done with flowers, lamps, water, incense, etc.

The faithful observance of the fast and other rituals on this day ensures happiness, salvation, longevity and prosperity. After the completion of the vow clothes, grains, umbrella fans, pitchers filled with water, etc., are given in charity to the Brahmins according to ones means and capacity. In Jyeshtha it is very hot and the day is long, and so observing fast, without even taking a drop of water from dawn to dusk means a great act of piety and austerity. Ekadashi vow and vigil enhances mental equipoise, tolerance and spiritual power and grants great religious merit both here and hereafter.

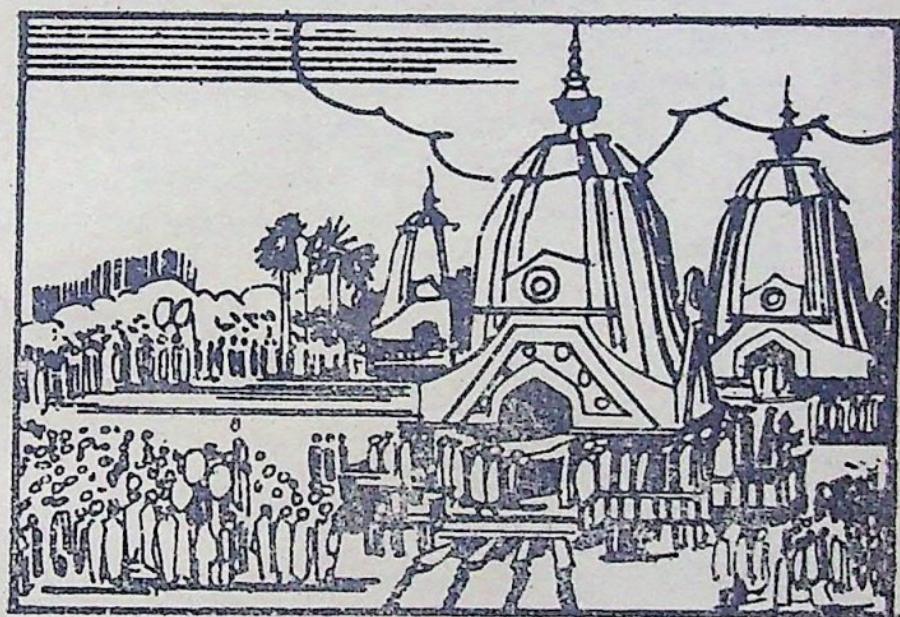
SNAN YATRA (Bathing Festival)

On Jyaishtha Purnima (full moon day of May-June) a grand bathing festival is held in Crissa. On this auspicious occasion the images of Lord Jagannath, Balbhadra, Subhadra and Sudarshan are brought in a grand procession to the bathing platform for their ceremonial annual ablutions. With the recitation of the mantras from the Vedas, 108 pots of consecrated waters are poured upon the deities. Then the deities are attired ceremonially in "Gaja Visha", before they retire in seclusion for fifteen days called "Anavasara Period". It is an occasion of great rejoicing and merry-making.

RATHA YATRA

On the second day of the bright half of Ashadha (July), Ratha Yatra is celebrated throughout the country, the chariot procession of Sri Jagannath (Lord of the Universe) taken out through the main markets and streets. But

main festival is held at Puri in Orissa. The Car Festival of Puri is famous all over the world and thousands of devotees from the country and abroad participate in this most spectacular religious event. The 12th century imposing Jagannath shrine, 60 kms from Bhubaneshwar, is situated on Nilachala mountain. It is one of the four great holy places. The other three are Badrinath, Dwarka and Rameshwaram.



For a devout Hindu, a pilgrimage to Jagannath Puri is a must and a life long ambition. It is believed that a three days and nights sojourn to Puri will free a pilgrim from future births and deaths. Most of the time it is crowded with pilgrims, but on the occasion of Ratha Yatra, Puri becomes a ocean of seething humanity. On this auspicious day, Lord Jagannath is taken out in a huge procession and on an enormous chariot, 45 feet high, 35 feet square, and supported on 16 wheels, 7 feet in diameter. The chariot is drawn by

thousands of devotees who view with one another to have this honour.

The other two chariots are those of Balbhadra and Subhadra, brother and sister of Sri Krishna. Balbhadra's chariot is 44 feet high and has 14 wheels, while that of Subhadra is 43 feet high and has 12 wheels. The event commemorates Krishna's journey to Mathura from Gokul at Kansa's invitation. The chariot procession goes along the broad avenue to Gundicha Mandir, the Lord's Summer Garden House, where they stay for seven days and then are brought back to the temple. At the termination of the ceremony the chariots are broken up and used to manufacture religious relics. Every year new chariots are made. The deities themselves are made of wood and renewed at certain intervals when certain astronomical conditions are there. The wood selected for this purpose must also satisfy certain conditions. During the past one and half centuries the images were remade in 1863, 1893, 1931, 1950, 1969 and 1977. An outstanding feature of the temple is that there is no cast distinction and all are equal whether one happens to be a brahmin or a chandal or shudra.

The other festival celebrated here with great fervour is the bathing festival or Snan Yatra in Jyaishtha, already mentioned. But Ratha Yatra is the most fantastic and captivating annual event. The legend of the origin of Lord Jagannath is equally fantastic. Krishna was killed by a hunter named Jara in ignorance, and Krishna's body was left to rot under a tree, but some pious persons found his bones and placed them in a box. Later Vishnu directed a devout king Indradyumna in a dream to make an image of Jagannath and to place the bones of Krishna inside it. Vishwakarma, the architect of the gods was assigned the job of making the image. He agreed on

he condition that he should be left undisturbed till the work was complete. A fortnight passed and the king grew impatient and entered the place, which made Vishwakarma angry, and he left the images unfinished. That is why the deities have neither hands nor feet. Indradyumna prayed to Brahma, who promised to make the image famous. Brahma gave the images eyes and souls and also acted as the high priest at consecration.

The king of Puri, the descendant of king Anantavarman Chodaganga, the original founder of the temple, alone has the right to carry the Lord's umbrella and other paraphernalia, and it is he who sweeps the path before the chariots. Over 6,000 male adults are in the Lord's service, headed by the king. Some 20,000 people are said in all to be dependent on the temple for their livelihood. The Jagannath temple is a kind of world in itself. The festival is observed almost everywhere in the country where there is a temple dedicated to Jagannath.

TEEJ

Teej, purely a festival of girls and ladies, is sacred to the goddess Parvati, the consort of Lord Shiva. It was on this auspicious day that Parvati was reunited with Shiva after a long separation. She declared this day sacred and auspicious and said whosoever invoked her would possess whatever they desired.

It is annually celebrated in most parts of India, and especially in the state of Rajasthan, on the third day of Ashadha. Gay processions bearing images of Parvati are taken out escorted by caparisoned elephants, camels and horses, as the bride Parvati leaves her parent's home for her husband. Before taking out procession the goddess is ceremonially worshipped and prayed.

Swings are hung on the trees and in the houses, where the maidens and women amuse themselves by swinging. They wear gay apparels in red, green and gold, and paint their hands and feet in delicate designs with henna, and sing gay songs in praise of the goddess and the monsoon. Thus, it also welcomes the monsoon. Fairs are held on this occasion and people enjoy themselves to their full.

HARI-SHAYANI EKADASHI

Every Ekadashi is a special for exercise in piety and devotion. It is observed both in the dark and bright fortnights (Krishna and Shukla Pakshas) of every month. But some Ekadashi are considered relatively more merit-giving. Hari-shayani Ekadashi is another such. It means the day when Lord Hari or Vishnu retires to sleep on the bed of Sheshanag, in the Kshirsagar. According to a popular religious belief Hari slumbers during the four months of the rainy season. It begins on the 11th day of the bright fortnight of Ashadha (June-July), and terminates on the 11th tithi of the bright fortnight of Kartika (October-November). Therefore, both these Ekadashis are considered especially sacred and Vishnu is worshipped on both these Ekadashis.

This period of four months of the rainy season is known as 'Chaturmas' and during this period such auspicious activities as marriage, thread ceremony, etc., are prohibited. During this period of four months, the sages, rishis, munis, etc., live at one place and meditate there only.

GURU VYASA PURNIMA

The full moon day of Ashadha is well-known all over the country as "Guru Vyasa or Ashadha Purnima". This festival dates back to times immemorial. This auspicious day is set

apart for the veneration and worship of the Guru. In ancient days the students or brahmcharis used to get their education in Ashramas and Gurukuls. The students would worship their teachers on this day and pay them their Gurudakshina or fee and presents according to their means and capacity. The devotees and disciples fast on this day and worship their gurus for seeking their blessings.

It is also known as Vyasa Purnima, because Rishi Vyasa himself was a great Guru. Vyasa or Veda-Vyasa, the son of Rishi Parashar and Satyavati, is also known as Krishna Dwaipayna, because he was dark complexioned and was born on an island or dwipa. He is said to have compiled the four Vedas, the Mahabharata and the eighteen Puranas.

This day may remind you the story of Eklavya, the matchless Nishada archer youth, who had given his right hand thumb in dakshina to his relentless guru and teacher Dronacharya. He gave it too gladly. Eklavya is one of the greatest examples of devotion to the teacher, and it is right that he is remembered on this day.

III. Varsha : Shravana - Bhadrapada

If Vasanta is the Rituraj, Varsha is the Mother and Queen of all the Seasons. Copious Rains quench the thirst, make everything on earth rejoice, prolong life, heal, make plants and herbs come-forth. Water is the basis of life, and we get it in the form of life giving Rains. It is during the months of Shravana and Bhadrapada that the rain bearing masses of clouds burst open and release the water. A verse in Chandogya Upanishad says -

"Water, verily, is greater than food. Therefore, where there are no good rains, living beings are afraid that food will be scarce. But when there are good rains, living beings are happy, thinking, there will be much food. It is water in its different forms which is the earth, the atmosphere, heaven, the mountains, Gods and men, animals and birds, grass and trees, wild beasts, worms, flies and ants. All these forms are only waters. Meditate on water."

What wonder and beauty Varsha is, can be gleaned from the following passage from the Ramayana of Tulsidas:

"Clouds gather in the sky and thunders roar; but my darling is gone and my soul is in distress. The lightning flashes fitfully amid the darkness, like the friendship of the vile which never lasts. The pouring clouds cleave close to the ground, as sages stoop beneath accumulated love. The hills endure the buffeting of the rain drops, as the virtuous bear the abuse of the wicked. The flooded streamlets rush proudly along, like mean men puffed up with a little

wealth. The water by its contact with the earth becomes as muddy as the soul when caught in the web of illusion! Drop by drop the waters gather and fill the ponds, like as when the quality of goodness develops in a good man; and the rivers flow into the bosom of the ocean, like as the soul, that has found Hari, is at rest for ever.

"The green earth is so choked with grass that the paths can no longer be distinguished, like holy books obscured by the wrangling of heretics.

"On all sides, there is a lively croaking of frogs, like a class of Brahmana students repeating the Vedas. All the trees put forth their new leaves, like pious souls that have come to matured wisdom. The aka and javasa plants have shed their leaves; as in a well-governed realm the schemes of the wicked come to nought. Search as you like the dusty footpath is no longer to be traced; like as when religion is put out of sight by passion. The earth rich with crops makes as godly a show as the prosperity of benevolent. The fireflies gleam in the darkness of the cloudy night like a mustered hand of hypocrites. The ridges of the fields are broken down by the heavy rains, like women ruined by too much license. The diligent cultivators weed their land, like philosophers who tif themselves of ignorance, vanity and pride. The cakva and other birds are no where to be seen, like virtue that fled at the coming of the iron age. However, much it may rain, no grass springs upon barren ground, so lust takes no root in the heart of Hari's worshippers. The earth gleams with swarms of living creatures of evry kind; so the subjects multiply under good government. Here and there weary wayfarers

stay and rest, like a man's bodily senses after the attainment of wisdom."

(Translated by F.S. Crowse)

This whole season itself is a long festivity. A great number of our sacred days, fairs and festivals occur during these two months. Some of these include Nag Panchami, Tulsi Jayanti, Raksha Bandhan, Onam, Ganesh Chaturthi, Janmashtami, Anant Chaturdashi and many others.

HARIYALI TEEJ

This festival falls on the third day of the bright half of Shravana. Primarily it is a women's festival. It is also known as Hari Tritiya. On this day women of all ages make merry; daughters and daughter-in-laws are given gifts, and the swings hung in the houses and gardens are enjoyed in abundance. Ladies sing gay songs and "Malhars".

It is celebrated on a large scale in Uttar Pradesh and especially in Braj Mandal. Preparation of local sweets in homes is its another highlight.

NAG PANCHAMI

Nag Panchami is observed on the 5th day of the bright half of Shravana (July-August). On this day nagas, cobras and snakes are worshipped with milk, sweets, flowers, lamps and even sacrifices. The images of Naga deities made of silver, stone, wood (or painted on the wall) are first bathed with wafer and milk, and then worshipped with the reciting of the following mantras :

नागः प्रीता भवन्तीह शान्तिमाप्नोति वै विभो ।

स शान्तिं लोक मा साद्य मोदते शाश्त्रीः समाः ॥

Snakes and cobras are held in awe and reverence in India. They are worshipped and offered prayers on Nag

chami. Fast is kept and brahmins are fed on this day. The observed on this day is considered a sure protection against the fear of snake-bite. At many places real cobras and snakes are worshipped and fairs held. On this day digging of earth is prohibited, because the serpents live under the earth or in the nether world and digging may hurt or annoy them. The various Puranas like Agni Purana, Skanda Purana, Padma Purana, etc., give details of snake-worship and its significance.

The Nagas, as mythical creatures are semi-divine beings. They are said to have sprung from Kadru, the wife of Rishi Kashyapa, and inhabit Patal or the regions below the earth, where they reign in great splendour. They roam about the earth wearing lustrous jewels and ornaments. The thousand-headed Shesha Nag or Ananta is the most powerful of them and is reverenced even by the gods. He bears the whole earth on a chaplet on this crown. When he nods or yawns, the earth with its oceans and mountains, begins to tremble.

Nag Panchami is also observed as Bhratri Panchami, and men having brothers worship snakes, their holes and keep fast to propitiate Nagas against the evil of snake-bites to their loved brothers. The serpent genii in India have semi-human physiology. Their families are handsome; and some of them are married with men, as Ulupi with Arjuna. The snake-deities are also regarded as the custodians of the treasures of land and sea.

TULSI JAYANTI

Tulsidas Jayanti is celebrated on the 7th day of the bright half of Shravana. The great saint-poet Tulsidas was contemporary to Akbar the Great. He was born of Brahmin

parents, but soon became an orphan, and was brought up and educated by a saint named Narharidas. Narharidas was instructed to do so by God in a dream. It is he, who gave him the mantra of "Ram-nam". Tulsi married and started living the life of a householder, but some chance words of his wife awakened in him his ardent Bhakti towards God, and he became a sanyasi and began to live at Varanasi.

There he wrote his so well-known "Ramacharitra Manas" besides a dozen other books. He wrote his masterpiece in the language of the common people for the benefit of the masses. In the words of Grierson, "Over whole of the Gangetic valley his work is better known than the Bible is in England". His Ramayana is verily the life-breath of the devout Hindus.

In no uncertain terms, he has emphasized the significance of the path of devotion or Bhakti as a means of spiritual evolution and final liberation. He lays stress on the constant repetition of Ram-nam, because in this Iron Age (Kali-kalpa) knowledge, yoga, samadhi and dispassion are of little avail. Therefore, constantly repeat the name of Rama with unwavering faith. Greater than austerity, pilgrimage, oblation discipline and fasts is the repetition of the name of Hari.

His own saintly example and the magic of his writing has done more for the spiritual upliftment of the masses than the teachings of hundreds of gurus. He and his works are so greatly revered that tradition regards him as Valmiki reborn.

It is believed that he died on the same tithi, and a couplet is often quoted in this connection :

संवत् सोलह सो असी, असी गंग के तीर ।
श्रावण शुक्ला सप्तमी तुलसी तज्ज्यो शरीर ॥

On the auspicious day of his Jayanti and Moksha, fast kept, charities are done. Ramayana is read and recited, Brahmins are fed, and Lord Rama, along with his consort Sita and devotee Hanuman, is worshipped with great religious fervour. In literary and social circles, discussions, lectures, seminars and symposiums are organised on his teachings, life and works.

PUTRADA EKADASHI

This is observed on the 11th day of the bright half of Shravana. As the name itself shows, it is observed particularly by the sterile parents in order to get a son. The observance of fast and piety on this day is said to result in getting a son, and it also destroys the sins of the aspirants. Like other Ekadashis; it is also dedicated to Lord Vishnu.

Fast is observed, Vishnu is worshipped and meditated upon, and the Brahmins, learned in the Vedas and sacred religious lore, are fed and given robes, money, etc., in charity on this day. At night the aspirants should sleep in the room where Vishnu has been worshipped.

A legend in this connection goes :

In ancient days there was a king called Mahijit who ruled the earth from his capital Mohishmati. He was very wise, rich, religious, powerful and peace-loving, but he was without issues. It was a source of great worry to him day and night. One day he called all his learned, wise and intellectual people, seers and rishis into an assembly and put before them his problem.

In the assembly there was Rishi Lomesh, most learned holy person and knower of the Brahman. He told the king that in the previous birth he had prevented a cow from drinking from a pond on the Ekadashi falling on the

bright fortnight of Shravana. And thereby he had incurred a curse of remaining without a son. Now, if he propitiates the gods and atones for his sins by observing fast and piety on this day, he can be blessed with a son. At night he should keep the vigil and spend his time in meditation and chanting the praises of Lord Hari.

The king and the queen did accordingly. They observed a strict fast, gave jewels, money, robes, elephants, horses and cows to the Brahmins in charity; meditated upon Vishnu and kept the night vigil on that day. Consequently, after 12 months they were blessed with a handsome son and an heir to the throne.

Similarly the Ekadashi falling in the dark half of the Shravana should be observed. This Ekadashi is known as Kamada Ekadashi, the wishfulfilling Ekadashi.

NARIELI PURNIMA

On the full moon day of Shravana is celebrated Narieli Purnima to appease the fury of the Sea-god Varuna. It also marks the end of monsoon, and is primarily observed by sailors, fishermen and others living in the coastal areas of South India. They offer coconut to the sea on this occasion. If the sea happens to be far away, people go to some nearby tank, pool, river or some other source of water and offer the coconut.

JHULAN YATRA

On Shravana Purnima this festival is observed in Orissa. It falls in August. On this day Swinging Festival of Lord Jagannath is celebrated. In lavishly decorated swings Lord Jagannath is given to relax to the accompaniment of music and dance. The celebration is particularly observed in the

gannath Temple at Puri and other shrines and mathas of
e town for a week preceding the Shravana Purnima. The
ll moon day of the month marks the culmination and end of
e festival.

RAKSHA BANDHAN

The festival of Raksha Bandhan is observed on the full moon day of Shravana (July-August). The word "Raksha" means protection. On this auspicious day women and girls tie an amulet-like thread round the right hand wrists of their brothers as a token of protection against evil during the ensuing year. The thread is called "Rakhi" and is made of a few colourful cotton or silk twisted threads. It can also be prepared from the threads of gold or silver. The brothers give their sisters gifts of money, clothes and other valuable things in return. Sisters feed their brothers with sweets, dry fruits and other delicacies on this occasion.

Priests and Brahmins also tie this kind of thread round the wrists of the right hands of their patrons and receive gifts. They recite a mantra or a sacred formula while doing so to charge the thread with the power of protection :

येन वद्धो बली राजा दानवेन्द्रो महाबलः ।
तेन त्वां प्रतिबन्धनामि रक्षे मा चल मा चल ॥

The thread charged with the power of the mantra protects wearer from the possible evils.

According to Hindu scriptures Sachi, the consort of Indra, god of heaven, tied such a mantra charged thread round right wrist of her husband when he was disgraced in the battle by the demon forces. Indra again fought and gained a convincing victory over the demons, and recovered his lost

capital Amaravati. The sacred amulet helped him in defeating the enemy.

In South India, it is celebrated as Avani Avittam. Here the thread (Upanayna) is changed and libation of water is offered to the ancestors and rishis on this occasion. The new thread is worshipped with saffron and turmeric paste before wearing and the old one is discarded in the water of a pool, tank or river. This day is specially significant for a Brahmin boy who has recently been invested with an upanayan (holy thread). It reminds him of the glorious religious significance. Vedas are also read and recited on this day.

In Bombay coconuts are offered to the sea-god Varuna on this occasion. Exchange of sweets, setting up of fairs, visiting the relatives and friends, sending the 'rakhis' by post to brothers living at far off places, and remembering the Rishis and Gurus whom we are indebted for their guidance and spiritual knowledge, are other highlights of this festival.

SHRAVANI MELA

In the sacred month of Shravana, a grand fair is held in Bihar at Deoghar. During this month devotees pick up water from the holy Ganga at Sultanganj and carry it on their shoulders to Deoghar and offer it on Shiva Lingam. The 100 km distance from Sultanganj to Deoghar, is covered by trekking. All along the long route the pilgrims go on chanting "Bol Bam! Bol Bam!". Thousands and thousands of them, all clad in saffron carry the sacred water in kanwars, continue trekking day and night in rains or scorching sun to their destination. In the shrine at Deoghar pilgrims throng in a large number carrying Ganga jal and shouting. "Bol Bom!". They present a unique and unforgettable sight.

ONAM

Onam is the most famous festival of Kerala. It is celebrated in the Malyalam month of Chingam, corresponding to Adra (August-September). It is a harvest festival characterized by four days of feasting, merry-making and famous 'snake' boat races. These boats may be paddled by up to 100 persons. The snake boat race of Alleppey, held annually in August, is most prominent of all. The number of the paddlers rowing a boat indicates the affluence of the man whom it belongs to.

A clay moulded image of Vamana, the fifth incarnation of Vishnu is worshipped on this day in the temples and the houses. The youngers are given gifts of clothes and other things by the elders. The second day of the festivity, Bali is believed to visit his kingdom in Kerala. The Puranas relate a very interesting story about Vamana and Bali :

"Bali was a virtuous demon king. He was the son of Virochana and grandson of Prahlad. He did great tapas and defeated Indra and extended his rule and authority over the three worlds. The harassed and humiliated gods prayed Vishnu for protection, and he incarnated himself as Vamana, the son of Aditi and Kashyapa. Relying on Bali's reputation for charity, Vamana approached him and begged him the gift of three paces of land for making a sacrificial altar. As soon the gift was given, Vamana grew into an enormous size, and then by taking two paces he measured all the earth and the heavens, and thus won back the whole of Bali's kingdom for the gods. But then being reminded of Bali's merits, generosity and other qualities, he stopped short, and left to Bali the nether regions or the Patal Loka. Bali is also called Mahabali, and his capital was Mahabalipuram, near Madras.

Bali was also permitted by Vamana to visit his kingdom and the subjects once a year, and this visit regularly celebrated in Kerala, and particularly in Malabar by his devotees on Onam. To welcome their ancient god King Bali, the people of Kerala tidy up their houses and environs, decorate the houses with flowers and leaves and also arrange grand feasts and many types of amusements. The spectacular snake-boat race mark the crowning glory of these amusements and games.

TIRUPATI FESTIVAL

In the month of Bhadra (August-September), a grand festival is held annually at Tirupati, the seat of Lord Venkateswara, a manifestation of Lord Vishnu. The festival lasts 10 days, and during it devotees from all over the country congregate here to seek Lord Venkateswara's blessings and various gains in material and spiritual spheres. Even on ordinary days over 20,000 pilgrims, on an average, hurry here to pray and worship the deity. A pilgrimage to this shrine may also result from a vow taken in some difficulty. An unbelievable mammoth crowd queues up for hours every day to have a darshan of the deity.

This, one of the richest temples in the world, is situated on Tirumala hills, seven in number, which correspond to the seven hoods of the snake-god Adishesha, who forms the body of Vishnu in the cosmic ocean. And because of these picturesque hills Venkateswara is also known as the "Lord of the Seven Hills". The various Purnanas describe how why this is an essential pilgrimage centre for each and every devout Hindu. It is a tradition here that devotees, whether men or women, shave their hair off as a votive offering.

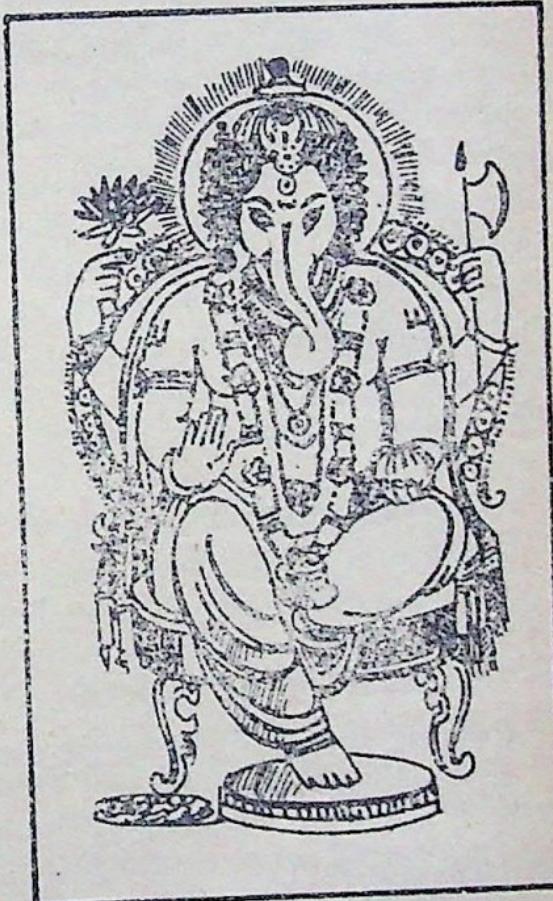
youth fulfilled. Parents bring their very young children and perform their first tonsure at the lotus feet of the Lord.

GANESH CHATURTHI

Ganesh or Vinayak Chaturthi is one of the most popular Hindu festival, celebrated all over the land, as a birthday of Lord Ganesha, the elephant-headed God, on the fourth day of the bright half of Bhadra (August-September). The clay moulded figures of Lord Ganesha are worshipped during this festival and then immersed into the sea, river, pool or some other such water. Ganesha is the God of wisdom, learning, prudence, success and power. His names are repeated in the beginning of every thing. As Vighnеш or the remover of the obstacles, he is propitiated at the start of every activity,

whether it be a journey, marriage, initiation, house construction, the writing of a book or even that of a letter.

He is a great scribe and learned in the religious lore and scriptures. It was Ganesha, who at the dictation of the seer Vyasa, wrote the Mahabharata. He is also the Lord of Ganas,



the Shiva's hosts. He bears a single tusk (ek danta) and holds in his four hands a shell, a discus, a goad and a lotus and is always accompanied by his mount, the rat. Ganesha is a great lover of sweets and fruits. He is also the presiding deity of Muladhara Chakra (plexus) or the psychic centre in the human body where the Kundalini Shakti resides.

There are two very interesting myths about his birth and how he came to possess the head of an elephant. One myth relates that disliking Lord Shiva's surprise visits during her baths, Parvati formed her scurf into a man's figure and gave it life. Then, she placed Ganesha to guard her bath-house entrance. Shiva came and tried to enter but when he found his way barred he cut off his head. It greatly angered Parvati, and so ultimately Shiva had to send someone to fetch another head for Ganesha. The first creature found by him was an elephant. Its head was brought and planted on Ganesha's shoulders.

Another version says that Parvati was blessed with a beautiful son. All the gods assembled to see and admire the son of Shiva-Parvati. They all gazed at the child except Shani, because he was under a curse, which caused any being he looked at to be burnt to ashes. Parvati insisted that Shani also looked at and admired her son. No sooner did Shani do so than Ganesha's head was burnt to ashes. Parvati cursed Shani for having killed his son, but Brahma intervened and comforting told her that if the first available head were planted on her son's shoulders, he would be alive again. So Vishnu set forth on Garuda and the first creature he found was an elephant sleeping beside a river. He cut off its head and it was fixed on Ganesha's trunk.

Similarly there is another interesting story which relates why he has only one tusk. On Ganesh Chaturthi, the images of Ganesha are worshipped with sweet balls 'laddoos' or

modakas), water, new raiments, incense, flowers, scent, betel leaf and naivaidyas (food offerings). His mantra is repeated, he is meditated upon and worshipped and the naivaidya distributed as Prasad. Brahmins are fed and given gifts. In Maharashtra this festival is observed with great religious fervour, pomp, gaiety and eclat and Ganesha idols are taken out in grand processions before immersion into the sea.

HARITALIKA TEEJ

Haritalika fast (vow) is observed on the 3rd day of the bright half of Bhadra (August-September). This fast is observed by the Hindu women to honour the goddess Parvati and her consort Shiva, and their idols are worshipped ritually. Parvati, the daughter of Himalaya and Mena, desirous of having Shankara as her husband, did severe tapas and finally had him as her Lord and husband. From that day onwards the married women worship the divine couple, and keep strict fast to ensure their conjugal happiness and prosperity. Unmarried girls do so to have suitable husbands of their choice. Brahmins are given money, etc., in charity, unmarried girls are fed and the aspirant women tell the story of Haritalika among themselves and break the fast in the evening.

The next morning the sun is worshipped and offered water.

RISHI PANCHAMI

Rishi Panchami fast and ritual are observed on the fifth day of the bright half of Bhadra (August-September). This day, its piety and acts of devotion are dedicated to the Sapta Rishis or the Seven Seers, mental sons of Brahma. They are : Bhrigu, Pulastya, Kratu, Pulaha, Marichi, Atri and Vashistha. It is primarily a women's fast and festival, but can be observed even by a man for the well-being and happiness of his wife.

An earthen or copper pitcher, filled with water, is installed on an altar sanctified with cow dung, and eight petalled lotus is also made thereon. Then, the seven Seers are worshipped, with betel leaf, flowers, camphor and lamp. Then, the Saptarishis are prayed and worshipped. Devi Arundhati, the wife of Rishi Vasishtha, a model of conjugal excellence, is also worshipped along with the Seven Sages.

Only fruits are taken on this day when breaking fast, and salt, milk, ghee and sugar are not taken at all. Brahmins are given dakshina by the aspirants and it pleases the Seven Seers and the gods.

JANMASHTAMI

On the eighth day of the black half of Bhadra (August-September) was born Shri Krishna, the eighth Avtar or incarnation of Vishnu. Therefore, this day is well-known as Janmashtami or Krishna-Janmashtami. This auspicious day of birth of Krishna, the direct manifestation of Vishnu himself, is celebrated in all parts of India with eclat and great enthusiasm. In the Bhagvad Gita Krishna declares: "All this Universe has been created by me; all things exist in me" and Arjuna addresses him as "the supreme universal spirit, the supreme dwelling, the eternal person, divine prior to the God, unborn, omnipresent". His life is celebrated in great detail in the Puranas like Harivamsha and Shrimad Bhagvatam. The circumstances in which he was born were quite peculiar and mysterious. He incarnated himself primarily to destroy evil and wickedness and to establish Dharma.

The demon King Kansa was a great and dreaded tyrant but he loved his sister Devaki, and at her marriage with Vasudeva, he, out of great affection, drove their married chariot. Then, all of a sudden an oracle told him that eight born of Devaki shall be the cause of his doom and de-

at this he would have killed her then and there, but for the intervention of Vasudeva and their promise to give him over such and every child born to them. They kept their promise, and Kansa killed all of their seven children one after the other a great suffering and grief of the couple. They were kept in the prison under strict watch and in chains and locks.

So, Krishna was born to them eighth son in the prison cell. But it so happened, with divine grace, that the guards fell asleep, their chains loosened and locks and the gates of the prison cell opened. Vasudeva took the child Krishna to Nanda's House in Gokula and exchanged him for a baby girl born there to Yashoda.

When Kansa heard of the birth of girl child, he at once rushed to the prison cell, and lifted the female child high, clutching it by the feet and was about to dash her against a wall, when it slipped from Kansa's grip and assuming the beautiful form of the Divine Mother vanished saying, "Wretch! I am the destroyer is flourishing in Gokula". There was a great joy and rejoicing in Gokula at the birth of a son to king Nanda and queen Yashoda. Yashoda was quite unaware of the change that had taken place during the night.

The Janmashtami celebrations start right from the early morning with bath in sacred waters and prayers, etc., but the grandeur reaches in the midnight with the rising of the moon, which marks the divine birth. On this auspicious day, strict



fast is kept and broken only after the birth of Krishna at midnight. The temples and homes are decorated, scenes depicting Krishna's birth and his childhood pranks, etc., are staged with models both living and inanimate. Child Krishna's image is put into a richly decorated swing and rocked with a tender care all the day by the devotees. At night after birth, a small image of toddling Krishna is bathed in Charnamrita, amidst chanting of hymns, blaring of the conches, ringing of the bells and joyous shouting of "victory to Krishna".

In Braja Mandala, especially in Gokula and Mathura, this festival is celebrated with greatest possible religious fervour and enthusiasm and the special deliberations of the day are relayed on the air. People from distant places congregate at Mathura and Vrindavana on this day to participate in the festival. The piety and fast observed on this day ensure birth of many good sons, and salvation after death. Reading and recitation of the Bhagvatam and Geet Govindam are most recommended on this day.

HALA SHASHTI

It is also known as Balaram Shashti, and is observed on the sixth day of the dark half of Bhadra. Balram, the elder brother of Krishna, was born on this day. Our scriptures say that Vishnu took two hairs, a white and another black, and became Balarama and Krishna, the sons of Devaki. As soon as Balarama was born, he was carried away to Gokula to serve his life from the tyrant Kansa, and he was brought there as a child of Rohini. He and Krishna grew together and took active part in many adventures which included the killing of many demons. He was a preceptor both of Bhima and Duryodhana. He had refused to side either with the Pandavas or

or the Kauravas. Balarama died just before Krishna, as he sat under a banyan tree in the outskirts of Dwaraka.

Balarama's weapon was a plough, so it is called Hala (Plough) Shashti. On this day fast is kept by the women to ensure happiness, prosperity and longevity to their sons and only buffalo milk and curds are taken. The plough is also worshipped on this day. This fast, primarily a rural affair, is observed with much enthusiasm in northern India.

After morning ablutions, a small piece of ground is sanctified and plastered with cowdung, etc., and a tiny water hole is dug in it and then the branches of ber (jujube plum), bular (a kind of fig tree), and palash (Butea Frondosa) are planted there in and worshipped.

Unmarried girls observe the Chandra Shashti on this day, and fast, which is terminated with the rising of the moon in the night, whom they offer water and worship.

RADHA ASHTAMI

The eighth day of the moon is always Shakti's own day and so is the ninth. Radha Ashtami is celebrated on the eighth day of the dark fortnight of Bhadra (August-September). On this tithi was Radha born. She was an incarnation of Lakshmi and worshipped accordingly. Radha, the favourite mistress and consort of Krishna, during his Vrindavana days, she is also a symbol of human soul drawn to the ineffable god, Krishna, or the pure divine love to which the fickle love returns.

On this day after early morning ablutions, the image of Radha is bathed in Panchamrita and then richly adorned and ornamented before offering food and worship. Fast is kept on this day and Prasad distributed.

ANANT CHATURDASHI

It falls on the 14th day of the bright fortnight of Bhadra (August-September). On this auspicious day Vishnu sleeping on the bed of Ananta (the Serpent Shesha), in the milky ocean is worshipped and meditated upon. While Vishnu slumbers on Ananta, his consort Lakshmi massages her feet.

On this day fast is observed and fruits, sweets, flowers etc., are offered to Vishnu in worship. A raw thread coloured in turmeric paste and having 14 knots is also tied on the upper right arms while meditating on Shesha-sayi Vishnu. This ensures protection against evil, prosperity and happiness. The Pandava princes in exile were advised by Sri Krishnaji observe this fast to regain their lost kingdom and prosperity. They did accordingly, and then were able to defeat the evil minded Kaurvas and regain their lost kingdom, wealth and reputation and happiness.

PARTYSHANA PARVA

It is a Jain festival, and is celebrated by both the Svetambar and the Digambar sects in the month of Bhadra (August-September). The Svetambar Jains start observing it in the half of the month from the 13th day up to the fifth day of the bright half for eight days. But the Digambar (the sky-clad) Jains begin to observe it from the fifth day of the bright half of Bhadra and terminate it after eight days on the 13th day. This festival signifies a man's emergence into a world of spiritual and moral refinement from that of grossly depraved world.

The ten cardinal virtues cultivated during this festival are : forgiveness, charity, simplicity, contentment, truthful self-restraint, fasting, detachment, humility and continence.

the festival all the above ten virtues are lectured upon Jain saints and their cultivation stressed upon.

In the days of the celebration, the devout Jains keep fast only once in a day, worship the Tirthankaras, and try to imbibe the qualities and virtues of great Jain saints and others. This is also the occasion of self-analysis and purification and to do away with ones own shortcomings, etc. Jains ask for one another's forgiveness during this period for an offence done knowingly or unknowingly. Thus, it helps in restoring lost relations and friendship.

IV. Sharad : Ashvina-Kartika

SEASONS and their accompanying festivals weave a complex but wonderful cultural pattern. They are gay and happy occasions, and enliven the life with a new spirit of joy and hope. Sharad, the Autumn is one of the most beautiful seasons, corresponding to September-November. With the coming of sweet autumn-faced Sharad, the Rains slowly mark their exit, and a charming season is ushered in. It is characterized by its azure clear skies, brimful sparkling lakes and rivers. It has been sung and glorified down all these ages. Ashvina and Kartika are two of the most auspicious months of the Hindu calendar. This is also a season of great festivity and rejoicing. In the words of Kalidas :

The autumn comes, a maiden fair
In slenderness and grace,
With nodding rice-stems in her hair
And lilies in her face.

In flowers of grasses she is clad
And as she moves along,
Birds greet her with cooing glad
Like bracelets, tinkling song.

A diadem adorns the night
Of multitudinous stars,
Her silken robe is white moonlight
Set free from cloudy bars.

And on her face (the radiant moon)
 Bewitching smiles are shown,
 She seems a slender maid, who soon
 Will be woman grown.

Over the rice-fields, laden plants
 Are shivering to the breeze,
 While in his brisk caresses dance
 The blossom-burdened trees.

He ruffles every lily-pond
 Where blossoms kiss and part,
 And stirs with lover's fancies fond
 The young man's eager heart.

Some of the important festivals and fasts which occur during Sharad, are Pitra Paksha, Dussehra, Navratra, Deepavali, Kartika Snan, Karwa Chauth and Guru Parab.

KOJAGARA

This festival is observed on the night of full moon in the month of Ashvina (September-October). The word "jagra" is a combination of two terms, Kah+jagara, which means "who is awake?". It is an exclamation of goddess Laxmi, who descends on the earth on this auspicious night and blesses with wealth and prosperity all those who are awake. Hence, the night is spent in festivity and various games of amusement, in honour of the goddess.

It is a harvest festival and is celebrated throughout the country. Lakshmi is worshipped and night vigil is observed. According to a folk-tale, once a king fell on evil days, and was in great financial straits, but then his queen observed a fast and night vigil, and worshipped the goddess of wealth, Lakshmi. Consequently, they were blessed by the goddess and they regained their prosperity.

VALMIKI JAYANTI

The birthday of the Ai Kavi (the First Poet), Valmiki, is celebrated on the full moon day of Ashvina (September-October). Valmiki is the author of the so-celebrated Ramayana in Sanskrit. He was contemporary of Rama, the hero of the Ramayana. Valmiki himself is represented as taking part in some of the scenes he relates. He received the banished Sita into his hermitage and educated her twin sons Kush and Lava. The invention of the "Shloka" (epic metre) is attributed to Valmiki.

Originally, Valmiki belonged to a depressed class and was a sort of robber. He robbed and even killed the people passing through the forest, but because of the influence of sages, he repented and betook himself to a hermitage on a hill in the district of Bonda in Bundelkhand. There, he is said to have eventually received Sita, when banished by Rama.

He got his name "Valmiki" because when immersed in meditation, he allowed himself to be overrun with ants like an anthill. His original name was Ratnakar. Many depressed classes in the country trace their lineage to Valmiki. On his birthday he is worshipped and prayed and his portrait is taken out in gay processions through the main bazaars and streets. Kirtans are also held in Valmiki temples.

PITRA PAKSHA

The dark half of the Ashvina (September-October) is observed as Pitra Paksha throughout the Hindu world. Sacrifices called Shraddha is offered to the dead and departed ancestors of the family. On each day of the fortnight oblations of water and Pindas or balls of rice and meal are offered to the dead relatives by the surviving relatives.

Shraddha is not a funeral ceremony but a supplement to such ceremony. It is an act of reverential homage to dead person performed by relatives, and is supposed to supply the dead with strengthening nutriment after the performance of the previous funeral ceremonies has endowed the ethereal bodies. It is believed that until Shraddha has been performed the deceased relative is a preta or a restless, wandering ghost and has no real body. Only after the Shraddha, he attains a position among the Pitris or Divine Fathers in their blissful abode called Sri-loka. A Shraddha is most desirable and efficacious when done by a son.

The eldest son or some other elder male member of the family performs Shraddha in honour of the deads and offers oblations. Part of the food-offerings is also given to the cows and the crows. Brahmins are fed and given dan-dakshina, for it is believed that whatever is given to the Brahmins also reaches the departed souls. Khir, a sweet milk and rice preparation, is especially prepared and offered to the Pitris on this occasion. On the last day of the fortnight, i.e., Amavasya oblations are offered to all those dead ancestors whose tithi of death is not known. In Brahma Purana the significance of this ceremony is described. During Pitra Paksha shaving of beard, cutting of the hair, wearing of new clothes, pairing and the nails are not allowed.

DUSSEHRA

Dussehra or Vijay Dashmi is a very popular Hindu festival, celebrated with eclat throughout the country. It is observed on the tenth day of the bright half of Ashvina (September-October).

It is a ten-day celebration, during which Ramalila which is based on the epic story of the Ramayana, is staged at various places in most of the cities and towns in northern India with

elaborate rituals. During its performance the Ramayana constantly recited accompanied by music. It presents a blending of music, dance, mime and poetry before an enthusiastic and religious audience sharing every event of the story with the actors.

Struggle between the forces of good and evil, and eventual victory of the former over the latter, is basic to the Ramayana theme. Rama symbolizes the best in humanity, Ravana the evil forces. Dussehra in Sanskrit also means taking away the ten sins. The ten heads of Ravana, representing these ten sins and Rama destroys them. Ravana abducted Sita with the help of another demon named Maricha. Ravana kept Sita in the Ashoka Grove and persisted in making his wife, but Sita always thought of her husband Rama. Rama sent his messengers to Ravana and urged him to return, but the evil-minded Ravana refused to do so. Rama set off for Lanka with Sugriva, Hanuman, Angada, Jambavan and hundreds of other mighty monkeys. Ravana's younger brother Vibhishana, a noble soul and devotee of God, however, took refuge with Rama. Rama built a causeway in the sea to help him and his forces across the water.

Rama, along with his young brother Lakshmana, killed all the demons and their king Ravana and regained Sita. Finally they returned to Ayodhya in the vimana Pushpaka.

On this occasion huge effigies stuffed with brilliant fireworks are raised at various open grounds and set fire to by Rama. The effigies belong to Ravana,



other Kumbhakarna and son Meghnatha. This marks the nation and termination of the celebrations. Elaborate ay processions depicting various scenes of the Ramayana e form of tableaus, are taken out through bazaars and streets. Apart from all this, Ramlila is also performed as ce-drama by professional troupes.

Dussehra festival held at Mysore, is one of India's most rful phenomena. The spectacular procession taken out is day is a veritable extravaganza. The colourful Dussehra nd festival of Kulu is also very famous. Among the lillas, the one staged at Varanasi under the patronage of local Raja, deserves mention. On this auspicious day Lord is worshipped, prayed and meditated upon to obtain his ings and favour. In old days the kings generally marched forces on this day against their enemies, the day when a routed Ravana.

NAVRATRA/DURGA PUJA

Navratras are observed twice a year, once in Chaitra, precedingama Navami, and then in Ashvin (September-October) eding Dussehra. This nine-day Navratra commences with new moon of Ashvin and terminates with Mahanavami, on ninth lunar day of the bright half of the month. During nine days, devotees keep strict fast and Durga is worship-

The style of observing Navratra in different parts of the try may be different, but its sole aim is to propitiate her Durga and to seek her blessings.

On Pratipada (first lunar day of bright half of Ashvin), an en pitcher filled with water and its mouth covered with leaves and an earthen lid, is installed with invocation of esha, the god of learning and wisdom, and then Durga is

invoked and ritually worshipped with durva grass, leaves, lamps, incense, new grains, raiments, etc. Bar also sprouted and grown in a pot on this occasion, same are worn in caps and on ears on the final day. Un girls below the age of ten are also worshipped and give during these nine days. The aspirants sleep on the and keep strict fast all these days. A clarified butter always kept burning before the installed pitcher during celebration, and daily Durga-saptashti, Devi Bhagvat and Devi Mahatmya section of the Markandeya Pu read and recited.

In Bengal, Durga Puja is celebrated with great ex and festivity and huge puja pavilions, with ten-arme are set up. Durga, the beautiful, but fierce goddess mount of the lion, killing the demon Mahishasura. In her ten hands she holds one of the gods' special Vishnu's discus, Shiva's trident, Varuna's conch she flaming dart, Vayu's bow, Surya's quiver, Indra's the Kubera's club, a garland of snakes from Shesha, charger a lion from the Himalayas. A fierce battle ween Durga and Mahishasura, but finally she killed a spear.

Durga Puja surpasses all other festivals in Benga popularity and mass appeal. During the celebration dance, drama and poetry are performed before the audiences. The earthen images of goddess Durga on the final day in triumphal processions from all coverage on the river where they are ceremonially Durga Puja is more than a ritual as it invests the lives one, and produces a fevish literary and artistic activi is supposed to visit her parents Himavan and moth



during these days only in the year. The final day marks the end of this brief visit when she leaves for Mount Kailash, the abode of her lord and husband Shiva. Bengali ladies give an emotion-charged and affectionate send off to Durga, and the ceremony is characterized with a daughter's departure to her husband's house.

SHARAD PURNIMA

Sharad Purnima is observed on the night of full moon of Ashvina. The Moon-god is also the lord of herbs, seeds, the Brahmins, waters and Nakshatras or Constellations. It is

believed that on Sharad Purnima, Amrit or elixir is being showered on the earth by the Moon through his beams.

On this auspicious day Kshir or khir (milk thickened with rice and mixed with sugar, candy, etc.) is especially prepared in the temples and homes, and offered to Hari amidst ringing of the bells and chanting of the hymns, then it is given in the morning as prasad to the devotees. The recipe is kept in the moonshine all the night so that it may absorb the amrit falling from the moon. Such khir is considered to possess many qualities. At night Moon-god is also worshipped and offered naivedya.

DEEPAWALI

Deepawali or the Festival of Lights is an important and popular festival celebrated throughout the country in one form or the other. It falls on the last day of the dark half of Kartik (October-November). As a matter of fact it is a five-day long festival, but the main celebrations are on Deepawali.

Dewali is associated with several legends. One myth says that on this auspicious day Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and good fortune, roams about and visits the houses of people. Therefore, people tidy up their homes, establishments and shops and decorate them lavishly to welcome the goddess. In the night she is worshipped with great devotion. It also commemorates the triumph of Lord Rama over Ravana, and Rama's return to Ayodhya. It is also on this day that Krishna killed the demon Narkasura.

A few days before the festival, the houses are whitewashed and completely cleaned. The courtyards, the gates and place of worship are decorated with bandanvars, flowery intricate coloured paperwork and at night every nook and corner of the house, etc., is illuminated with earthen lamps.

candles, and fireworks are displayed. People get up early in the morning and have bath and then move about freely in an atmosphere of gaiety, mirth, rejoicing and festivity. Lots of sweets are prepared and exchanged.

On this occasion people ask for each other's forgiveness for the wrongs done knowingly or unknowingly and mutual relations are reestablished and strengthened. Thus, all enmity is forgiven and forgotten and people embrace one another. At night Lakshmi, along with Ganesha is worshipped, old accounts are closed and new ones are opened. People in throngs go about the bazaars and streets during the night and appreciate the nest illumination. Special shops and bazaars are also set up on this occasion, and there is a brisk buying of sweets, utensils, clothes, jewellery, toys, etc.

Diwali also marks the advent of new season and the sowing of new crops. On this day begins the new Vikrama era and new account books are opened. The famous king Vikramaditya, after whose name the era is, was crowned on this day. People greet each other and distribute sweets. In Bengal Kali is worshipped with great fervour on this day. The Jains celebrate Deepawali as a day of final liberation and moksha of Lord Mahavira. Similarly Swami Dayananda Saraswati, the founder of the Arya Samaj, attained salvation on this day. The great Swami Rama Tirtha also entered his final samadhi on this tithi. At great Jaina shrines like that of Avapuri in Bihar, and Girnar in Gujarat, special puja festivals are held, sacred scriptures read and recited and Lord Mahavira worshipped. Thus, this great festival of lights symbolizes man's urge to move towards light of truth from darkness of ignorance and unhappiness.

DHAN TERAS

Two days prior Deepawali on the 13th day of the dark of Kartika, Dhan Teras or Dhanvantri Trayodashi is observed with great mirth and gaiety. Dhanvantri, the physician of gods who appeared at the churning of the ocean is worshipped on this day, specially by the physician-community. He is the father of Indian science of medicine and Ayurveda is attributed to him. He is also called Sudha-pani, because he appears from the ocean, carrying nectar in his hands.

The people get early at dawn and bathe, put on new clothes and keep fast. In the evening an earthen-lamp is invariably before the door of every house, and then fast is broken. Utensils are bought on this day because it is regarded auspicious.

NARAK CHATURDASHI

The next day to Dhan Teras, is celebrated Narak Chaturdashi. This day is dedicated to Yama, the god of Hell. The early morning bath at dawn on this day is considered of great religious merit. It is believed that those who bathe this tithi after the sunrise, get their religious merit destroyed. Therefore, people get up early in the morning and first have their ablutions, etc. Before bathing, oil is rubbed on the body, which is greatly invigorating and purifying.

After the bath, Yamraj is offered libations thrice to please and appease him, so that he may spare the person the terrors of death. On this day even those persons whose persons alive, offer these libations, otherwise they are not allowed to do so. Fast is observed and in the evening lamps are lit to Yama. It is believed that piety observed on this day in honour of Lord Yama, liberates a man from possible tortures of the hell.

GOVARDHAN PUJA

Govardhan Puja is celebrated on Pratipada, i.e., the first of the bright fortnight of Kartika (October-November), the following Deepawali. Annakut is also observed on the same day. This day is associated with an interesting event of Krishna's life. On this day Krishna lifted the Goverdhan mountain (in Vrindavana) on his little finger for seven days and protected the cows, and the people of Vrindavana against deluge of rain sent by enraged Indra, the god of heavens. rains.

It so happened that one day Krishna saw the people of Vrindavana making great preparations for the worship of Gaur. Krishna convinced them of its futility and induced them to worship Mount Goverdhan, who provided shelter to them and nourishment to their cows. They accordingly performed a great ceremony to honour the mountain and were amply rewarded by the manifestation of Krishna as the spirit of Goverdhan. It enraged Indra, and he sent a terrible deluge to teach a lesson to Nanda and the cowherds. Krishna then raised the mountain and protected them under it for seven days and nights. Ultimately, Indra realized who Krishna really was. He came to Krishna in real humility and paid him homage. Even today, people in thousands from all over India visit, worship and circumambulate Mount Govardhan on this day. Those who cannot come to Vrindavana, worship it at their respective homes with great devotion and give gifts to Brahmins. Cows and bulls are also decorated and worshipped on this day.

Bhaiya Duj.

Bhaiya Duj, symbolising the deep affection between brothers and sisters, is celebrated on the second day of the

bright fortnight of Kartika, which falls the next day Govardhan Puja. The married women invite their dear brother to their respective homes, apply turmeric or sandal paste on their foreheads, tie a coloured thread round their wrists, pray for their prosperity and longevity and then feed them on sweets and other delicacies. In return they receive valuable gifts. Unmarried girls do so at their parents' home.

Bhaiya Duj is also called the Yama Dvitiya, because this day also symbolizes the deep affection between Yama and sister Yamini. Sisters pray Yama for their brothers' long good health and happiness, and observe strict fast. The newborn Yamuna, sister to Yama, is also worshipped on this day.

KARTIKA SNAN

Among the twelve months of the year, some are regarded especially holy and sacred, and as such they are most suitable for the acts of piety. These are Vaisakha, Kartika and Magha.

All through the month of Kartika, the early morning bath in some sacred river, stream, pond or at a well is considered highly meritorious. On the sacred rivers like Ganga, Yamuna etc., a month long bathing festival is held. Some people specially set up their tents on their banks for this purpose. At the termination of month long bathing festival they return to their distant homes. During the month the aspirants observe strict continence, have regular morning bath in the streams, take a single simple meal every day and spend time in prayer, meditation and such other acts of spiritual devotion.

Women-folk in villages and towns get up quite early in the morning, and go to the sacred streams in groups, sing hymns, and after ablutions visit the nearby temples. They observe fast and hang lamps in the sky in small baskets.

the bamboo tops at their houses or on the river banks. These sky lamps are kept burning all through Kartika to light the path of departed souls across the sky. Tulsi is also worshipped in the evening, and an earthen lamp is placed near it.

TULSI VIVAHOTSVĀ

Tulsi plant is sacred and cultivated specially in homes and temples. It is considered wife of Vishnu and shown respect accordingly. It is offered daily puja by the women in the evening with lamps. Tulsi leaf is put in the mouth of a dying person along with Gangajal and this facilitates easy departure. Watering, cultivating and worship of Tulsi plant ensures happiness. When its leaves are put into any water it becomes as good as Gangajal. Tulsi leaves offered to Vishnu in Kartika (November) pleases him more than the gift of a thousand cows.

Tulsi is generally grown on a small square pillar, hollow the top, with its four sides facing the four cardinal directions. Since Tulsi is Vishnupriya (beloved of Vishnu), their marriage is celebrated in Kartika Shukla Ekadashi, i.e., the eleventh day of the bright half of Kartika (October-November). In Padma Purana we find the details of the ceremony. On this day she married to Vishnu. The image of Vishnu is richly decorated and then carried to the place where Tulsi plant is grown, and here the marriage is ritually solemnized. Fast is observed this day.

SURYA SHASHTI

On the sixth day of the bright fortnight of Kartika (October-November) this fast is observed, mainly by women having husbands and children. The fast is observed continuously for six days. On the preceding day only one meal is taken and that too without salt. On next day, i.e., on Shashti women

on fast do not take even water; and worship the sun with naivedya and water and keep night vigil.

The next day on Saptami, the aspirant women go to bathing ghats early before sunrise, and then having bathed, worship the rising sun and then only they break their fast. The Brahmins are also fed and given gifts on this day. The fast and piety observed on this day ensure good health, longevity, and happiness of their progeny and husbands.

SKANDA SHASHTI

Skanda Shashti is celebrated in South India with great religious fervour and devotion in the Tamil month of Tula (October-November). Skanda, the second son of Shiva, is also known as Kartikeya and Subramanya. He was produced without the intervention of a female. Shiva cast his seed into fire, and it was afterwards received by the Ganges. He was fostered by Krittika (Pleiades) and hence he has six heads and the name Kartikeya. He was born for the purpose of destroying Taraka, a demon whose austerities had made him formidable to gods.

Swami Kartikeya is represented riding a peacock, holding a bow in one hand and an arrow in the other. His wife is Sena or Kumari. He has many titles; as a warrior he is Msesena; Senapati; Siddha-sena, "leader of the Siddhas"; Yuddha-ranga; also Kumara, the boy; Guha, "the mysterious one"; Shakti-dhara "spear-holder"; and in the south he is Subramanya. He is also called Tarakajit, Dwadashsi (twelve-handed) and Dwadaksha (twelve-eyed).

In south India there are six places which are associated with his life and work and regarded most holy. At all places Skanda Shashti is celebrated with great fervour.

ands of devotees congregate at each temple to seek the blessings. It is the day when Taraka was defeated. ns are sung, kirtans chanted, people fed and scenes his life dramatized on the occasion. The festivity begins ys preceding the Shashti. Lord Subramanya is worshipped during these days and devotees make pilgrimages to cent Subramaniya shrines. The pieties and devotion ed on this day ensure success, prosperity, peace and ness. In the Gita Bhagvan Sri Krishna has said: "Among generals of armies, I am Kartikeya".

KARWA CHAUTH

Karwa Chauth is observed by married ladies on the fourth of the dark half of Kartika (October-November) in order to e prosperity, sound health and longevity of their nds. Widows and unmarried girls do not practice it. The d women keep a strict fast and do not take even a drop ter. They get up early in the morning, perform their ons, etc., and wear new and festive raiments.

Iva, Parvati and their son Kartikeya are worshipped on ay alongwith ten Karwas (the small earthen pots with s) filled with sweets. The Karwas are given to the ters and sisters along with gifts. At night when the appears, the women break their fast after offering water moon. The story of Karwa Chauth is told and heard by the women. Sometimes a Brahmin priest tells this and gets gifts in return. The married women receive gifts from their husbands, brothers and parents on this on. They touch the feet of their mother in-laws and elderly ladies of the family and seek their blessings.

There are many interesting stories about this celebration. and says that once on this day a young married woman

observed this fast at her parents house. She was very beautiful and tender. The austerity of the strict fast made her almost lifeless. So, her brothers caused to burn a fire on a nearby hill and showed her as the glow of the rising moon. Sooner did she break her fast on seeing the false moon, she received the evil news of her husband's death at a distant place. She immediately set out for her husband's home. On the way Shiva-Parvati met her and explained to her that the cause of her tragedy was the immature termination of the fast. Parvati gave her some blood from her little finger and asked the lady to sprinkle it on her dead husband. Parvati also advised her to observe complete and strict Karwa Chauth fast in future.

On reaching home, the lady sprinkled the holy blood over her husband's dead body and he was at once revived. Ever since then, she observed Karwa Chauth fast in strict conformity and lead a happy prosperous and healthy life with her husband and children.

DEVUTHANI EKADASHI

Vishnu slumbers for four months from the eleventh day of the bright half of Ashadha (June-July) till the tenth day of the bright half of Kartika (October-November). And then, he gets up on the eleventh day, which is known as Devuthani Ekadashi. During these four months all other gods sleep and so auspicious ceremonies like marriage, thread ceremony, etc., are not observed.

On this day, ladies observe fast, worship Vishnu and sing hymns in praise of various gods and goddesses around a cowdung cake-fire. It also marks the beginning of eating new products of the fields for the time in the season. These include especially sugarcane and waternuts. It is obviously a rural

festival, and is observed with much gaiety and festivity in the countryside. From this day onward marriage, etc.. can be held as it marks again the beginning of auspicious time. It is believed that Vishun got tired in killing the great demon Shankhasura, and so he went sleep for a period of four months and with him also slumbered the other deities.

GURU PARAB

The festivity of Guru Parab falls on the full moon day of Kartika (October-November) and is celebrated to commemorate Guru Nanak, the founder Guru of Sikhism: Guru Nanak was born in 1469 at Talwandi about 45 kms. away from Lahore and is now known as Nankana Sahib. At Nankana Sahib there is a beautiful Gurudwara, and a holy tank or sarovar. On Guru Parab, a grand fair and festival is held here, and Sikhs in thousands congregate here from India and abroad.

Nanak was a great reformer, preacher and a saint. In Sikhism he tried to harmonize both Hinduism and Islam. He never believed in caste-distinctions and liberalized social practices. He preached the name of God as a potent means of spiritual realization. His name and its repetition helps us to develop the best in us. A true Sikh strives not for salvation or paradise but always loves to see God. Many of Nanak's hymns, which form part of the Guru Granth Sahib, reflect clearly how the sight of God and his love itself is supreme.

God is both nirgun and sagun. Before creation 'God' lived absolutely in himself but then he became sagun and manifested himself and became what is called the name; and in order to realize Himself, He made nature, wherein He has His seat and is diffused everywhere and in all directions in the form of love.

Nanak travelled widely in India and abroad and his life and teachings have been a great source of inspiration. He was followed by nine other Gurus, in succession, under whom Sikhism gradually developed. On Guru Parab Guru Granth Sahib, the holy scripture, is continuously read and recited in the Gurudwaras, processions are taken out, free langars (meals) are arranged and prasad is distributed. The festival is observed with great enthusiasm all over India.

Similarly other Gurus are also commemorated on other Guruparabs. For example, the second Guru Parab commemorating Guru Govind Singh is celebrated in the month of Pausha (December-January).

KARTIKA PURNIMA

Sikhs celebrate Kartika Purnima as Guru Parab and Nanak's birthday, but the Hindus celebrate it as a day when God incarnated himself as Matsya Avtar or in Fish-formation. The aim of Fish Incarnation was to save Vavaswata, the seventh Manu, and the progenitor of the human race from destruction by a deluge.

Charities done and piety observed on this day are believed to earn high religious merit. Bathing in the Ganges, or in other holy water is considered of special religious significance. People keep fast, practice charities and meditate on God.

It is also believed that Shankara killed demon Tripurasura on this day and so he is also called Tripurari. Shiva is worshipped on this occasion and giving away of the bull, the mount of Shiva, as a gift to a Brahmin, is thought to be of great religious significance. Big cattle fairs are also held on this day at various places. For example, a Cattle Fair held at the sacred Pushkar Lake, near Ajmer, is a great draw, which

transforms the scene into a seething sea of colour and gaiety, tempered by the presence of the devout. Thousands of camels, cows, bulls, buffaloes, sheep, goats, etc., are brought there for sale. Camel races are held and there is a lot of fun and merry-making. Over a hundred thousand pilgrims take bath here on this day in the sacred lake.

V: Hemanta : Margashirsha-Pausa

HEMANTA ushers in the winter season, comprising Margashirsha or Agrahayana and Pausa Bhagwan Sri Krishna in the Gita has said, "Among the months, I am Margashirsha". Gradually it grows colder and then extremely cold in the far north of the country, but in the south it is refreshingly cool, pleasing and never really so cold.

Winter is the season of youth, struggle, vigour and aspirations. The Vedic Man therefore prayed to God, "May I attain the span of hundred winters". Kalidas has painted the season of Hemanta thus :

The bloom of tenderer flowers is past
And lilies droop forlorn
For winter-time is come at last
Rich with its ripened corn
Yet for the wealth of blossoms lost
Some hardier flowers appear
That bid defiance to the frost
Of sterner days, my dear.

The vines, remembering summer, shiver
In frosty winds, and gain
A fuller life from mere endeavour
To live through all that pain
Yet in the struggle and acquest
They turn as pale and wan
As lonely women who have missed
Known love, now lost and gone.

Then may these winter days show forth
 To you each known delight
 Bring all that women count as worth
 Pure happiness and bright
 While villages, with bustling cry
 Bring home the ripened corn
 And herons wheel through wintry sky
 Forget and thoughts forlorn.

The forbidding winter confines the people within doors,
 and there is not much scope for festivity and rejoicing.
 Therefore, there are festivals few and far between.

BHAIRAVA ASHTAMI

The eighth lunar day of the dark half of Margashirsha is known as Bhairava Ashtami. Bhairava is Shiva's gana, or his inferior form of manifestation. Bhairava is of terrible character and is worshipped to obtain success, prosperity, removal of obstacles and recovery from illness. As a terrible aspect of Shiva, he punishes the sinners, and for this purpose carries a danda, or a staff, or a rod. Therefore, he is also called Dandapani. He rides a dog, therefore, he is called Swaswa "whose horse is dog".

On Bhairava Ashtami, people having performed their early morning ablutions, worship Bhairava and his mount, the dog with sweets, flowers, etc. The dogs are fed with milk, sweets and such other delicacies. At night the aspirants keep vigil and spend the time in telling stories relating to Bhairavanath. Dead ancestors are also offered oblations and libations in the morning after bath, and then Kal-Bhairava is worshipped.

A myth says that once a controversy arose among the Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva that who was the greatest of them. Every deity pleaded his case, and ultimately the

controversy took such an ugly turn that they started talking of one another. A chance remark of Brahma so enraged Shiva that he at once produced Bhairava, and ordered him to cut off one of the five heads of Brahma. Bhairava at once did what he was told. Poor Brahma instantly became four-headed, and even now he remains so. It terrified all other gods and they propitiated Shiva and gana Bhairava.

VAIKUNTHA EKADASHI

Vaikuntha Ekadashi is celebrated in the South, in the month of Margashirsha, on both the eleventh days of bright and dark fortnights, with solemnity. Devotees observe fast and keep night vigil the whole night and do kirtan, japa and have meditation sessions. A gateway in the temple is thrown open on this day and aspirants pass through it, and this signifies the entrance into heaven or vaikuntha. Like any other Ekadashi rice eating is prohibited on this day, because a demon is said to dwell in rice grains on this day. A demon was born out of the sweat that fell down from Brahma's head, and he wanted a place to live in from Brahma. Brahma then told him to go and live in rice grains eaten by people on Ekadashi and to become worms in their stomach.

Once, a great demon called Mura who had 7,000 sons harassed the gods. The gods prayed Vishnu for protection against Mura. Vishnu sent his Yog Maya to kill the demon and his sons, and she did it successfully. Thereupon, Vishnu said that she would be known by the name of Ekadashi, and the people who observe fast and piety on this day would be freed from all sins and get a place in heaven.

There is another interesting story about the significance of Vaikuntha Ekadashi. Ambrishta, the king of Ayodhya was

great devotee of Vishnu and always observed Ekadashi vow. Once on Vaikuntha Ekadashi he fasted for three days and was about to break his fast, when Rishi Duravasha appeared at his gate. The king received the Rishi with due regards and requested him to have meals. Durvasha readily agreed and went to perform his ablutions.

The king waited and waited but the Rishi did not turn up and the auspicious moment of breaking the fast was approaching. If he did not break his fast before the day ended, his vow would not bear any results, but if he ate anything that would be a disregard to the sage. King Ambrisha was in a sort of dilemma. As a solution he took a sip of water.

When Durvasha returned, he knew exactly what had happened, and grew angry. In his anger he tore a hair from his head and charged it to destroy the king. Then, at once, the discus of Vishnu appeared and destroyed the power of the hair and chased the Rishi to kill him. Durvasha ran to Brahma and Shiva for protection against the discus, but it proved of no avail. Then, he sought refuge with Vishnu himself, but Vishnu said that he was dependent on his devotees. He ordered him to go and beg pardon of Ambrisha. He did accordingly and only then he could be saved.

GITA JAYANTI

The Bhagvad Gita Jayanti is celebrated on the eleventh day of the bright half of Margashirsha (November-December). It is believed that on this day Lord Krishna taught Arjuna the sacred lore of Gita on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, and thus made available to the whole of human race the Song Celestial. It forms a part of the famous epic Mahabharata.

At the beginning of the great war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, Arjuna, touched with pity for the possible slaughter and bloodshed of friends and relations, appealed to Krishna for guidance. Krishna had refused to take up arms on either side but accepted to become Arjuna's charioteer. Krishna urged Arjuna to follow his dharma or duty as a soldier and a Kshatriya, forgetting all other considerations. It immediately dispelled all his doubts and gloom, and he engaged himself whole-heartedly in the performance of his dharma.

The Gita makes it crystal clear in no uncertain terms that the path of salvation lies in action performed without desiring its fruits, which should be dedicated at God's lotus feet. This is real nishkam karmayoga, which leads to attainment of true happiness, peace of mind and freedom from passions. By devoted actions, without attachment to their results, one gets ones desires uprooted, and finally attains perfect serenity of soul and quiescence in the Supreme Soul at the time of death.

The Gita has been a great and an inexhaustible source of strength, inspiration and wisdom through all these centuries. The Gita, as a voice of the Supreme, is not merely a scripture, but a great song of universal wisdom and spiritual upliftment. It is to be always studied and pondered upon, for it illuminates a path leading to perfection and purity, which can be followed even while doing one's worldly duties. It urges all and sundry to perform actions remaining united with God at heart.

On the Gita Jayanti day, the Gita is read, recited and discourses are held on its various philosophical aspects. People fast and worship Krishna and the Gita, and resolve to study and imbibe the spirit of Gita with far greater efforts. As a matter of fact, a pocket edition of the Gita must always be

kept, and its selected verses reprinted whenever there is such an opportunity, because the more we study it, the more enlightened we are.

DATTATREYA JAYANTI

It is celebrated on the full moon day of Margashirsha (November-December) all over the country, and specially in Maharashtra. Dattatreya is the son of Rishi Atri and Anusuya. Anusuya, the jewel among the devoted and virtuous wives did severe a penance to beget a son equal in merits to Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesha, the Hindu Trimurti. Her so severe a penance aroused the jealousy of Lakshmi, Saraswati and Parvati, and so they sent their husbands Vishnu, Brahma and Shiva to test her virtue, by asking her to give them alms while nude.

They approached Anusuya in the guise of three mendicants and asked her to give alms with an uncovered body. She was on the horns of dilemma for a while, but then she reciting a mantra sprinkled a little water over the three sanyasis and they were instantly transformed into three babes, and her breasts at once swelled with milk. She took up the three babies and suckled them in a nude state. In the meantime Atri returned from his morning ablutions and was told about what had transpired during his absence. He already knew it through his divine vision. He fondly embraced the three children and they turned into one with three heads and six hands.

Lakshmi, Saraswati and Parvati got worried when their husbands did not return even after a lapse of long time. They hurried to Anusuya and asked her to give them their husbands back in alms. They also begged her forgiveness. Anusuya acceded to their request and the Trimurti of Vishnu, Brahma and Shiva appeared immediately in their real forms. They blessed the Rishi couple and the child Dattatreya.

Thus Dattatreya came to possess three heads and six hands. In him portion of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, or more particularly Vishnu, was incarnated. And so he is worshipped as a Triad. He had three sons, Soma, Datta and Durvasa, to whom also a portion of the divine essence was transmitted. He was the patron deity of Karta-virya and gave him thousand arms. Dattatreya learned from 24 objects which included the earth, water, fire, sky, moon, sun, pigeon, python, ocean, moth, honey-bee, elephant, deer, fish, etc. and treated them as his preceptors and gurus.

On Dattatreya Jayanti people get up early in the morning and have ablutions in sacred streams, etc., observe fast and spend the day in meditation, prayer and worship. They meditate on the life of Dattatreya and read his works which include Avadhuta Gita and Jivanmukta Gita. The image of Dattatreya is worshipped with flowers, lamps, incense, camphor, etc. and the aspirants take resolve to follow in the footsteps of Swami Dattatreya.

VAITARAJI VRATA

It is observed on the eleventh day of the dark half of Margashirsha (November-December). The aspirants observe fast and other rituals prescribed for such a day. In the evening a black cow is worshipped. She is bathed in fragrant water, and sandal paste, etc., is applied on its horns and then naivedya is offered. Brahmins are also given gifts of food, railment and a cow made of either gold or silver.

The river Vaitarani, the Hindu Styx, is to be crossed by the departed souls before the internal regions can be entered. The river is said to be filled with all kinds of filth, blood, ordour, etc. It runs with great impetuosity and can be crossed only with the help of a cow. That is why a cow is worshipped

and offered naivedya on this day. A cow given to Brahmins transports a dead man over that river. Therefore, cows are given in charity to Brahmins at the time of one's death.

RUKMANI ASHTAMI

This fast is observed by women, both married and unmarried on the eighth day of the dark half of Pausha (December-January). It is believed that Rukmani was born on this tithi. Rukmani was Lord Krishna's principal wife and queen. She bore him a son, Pradyumna. According to Hari-vansha Purana she was sought in marriage by Krishna, with whom she fell in love. But her brother Rukmin had betrothed her to Shishupala, king of Chedi. On her wedding day, as she was going to the temple, Krishna saw her, took her by the hand, and carried her away in his chariot. They were pursued by Shishupal and Rukmin, but Krishna defeated them both and took her safe to Dwarka, where he married her.

Rukmani along with Krishna and Pradyumna is worshipped on this day, strict fast is observed and married and unwidowed women are feasted and gifts given. A priest is also fed and given dan-dakshina on this day. It pleases Rukmani, and then it is easy to please Krishna. The observance of this fast ensures conjugal happiness and prosperity, and desired men as husbands to the unmarried girls.

SWARUPA DWADASHI

The vow of Swarupa Dwadashi is observed on the twelfth day of dark half of Pausha (December-January). It is observed by women desiring physical beauty, happiness and good progeny. They observe it with great enthusiasm, cheer, self control and restraint of senses.

On the preceding day, i.e., on Ekadashi, aspirant women ritually tell and listen to the stories relating to Lord Vishnu. On Dwadashi they keep strict fast and place an image of Vishnu in a vessel full of sesame (til), and worship it ritually. After that havana (sacrifice) is performed in the fire prepared from the dried cow-dung, taken before it fell on the ground. One hundred and eight oblations are offered in the fire thus made, and Brahmins are fed and given gifts in charity, then the women break their fast.

A story about this fast goes: Once Parvati asked her consort Lord Shiva, if there was any such fast or vow by observing which an ugly woman may turn into beautiful one. Ugliness is a curse and a woman not having good looks, is always at a great disadvantage, though she may possess many virtues. Shiva appreciated Parvati's concern about women not possessing good looks, and then told her that in such a situation the observance of a strict fast of Swarupa Dwadashi was the only remedy. Parvati thanked Shiva, and since then this fast is being observed by the women. Both pretty and not so pretty or ugly women observe it. One to maintain beauty and the other to obtain it.

VI. Shishira : Magha-Phalguna

SHISHIRA, comprising Magha and Phalguna, and corresponding to English January-March months, is refreshing cool, pleasant and health giving. It marks the advent of early spring. Magha is one of the holiest Hindu months, and many important festivals including Vasant Panchami, Pongal, Makar Sankranti, Maghi Purnima, etc., fall during this period. Phalguna brings forth the important festivals of Shivaratri and Holi. The scenes of early Spring are thus painted in words by Kalidas :

Now dearest, lend a heedful ear
And listen while I sing
Delights to evey maiden dear
The charms of early spring
When earth is dotted with the heaps
Of corn, when heron-scream
Is rare but sweet, when passion leaps
And paints a livelier dream.
When all must cheerfully applaud
A blazing open fire
Or if they need must go abroad
The sun is their desire
When everybody hopes to find
The frosty chill allayed
By garments warm, a window blind
Shut, and a sweet young maid
Then may the days of early spring
For you be rich and full

With love's proud, soft philandering
 And many a candy-pull
 With sweetest rice and sugarcane
 And may you float above
 The absent grieving and the pain
 Of separated love.

MAUNI AMAVASYA

The fifteenth day of the dark fortnight of Magha is well-known as Mauni Amavasya. Magha is one of the most sacred Hindu months. On this day complete silence is observed. If this tithi falls on Monday, then its auspiciousness increases all the more. This is also the day of a dip in the holy Ganga.

Like Kartika Bathing, Magha Bathing is also highly rewarding, and so, many aspirants live on the banks of Ganga throughout the month and daily enjoy bathing in the sacred river. The month long bathing and fasting end with the observance of Maura Amavasya.

On Mauni Amavasya, Lord Vishnu is worshipped and the peepal tree is circumambulated. In the Gita, Lord Krishna has said "Among the trees, I am Aswattha". Aswattha or peepal (*Ficus Religiosa*) is a holy tree.

The observance of piety and devotion on this day at Prayag, the prince of pilgrimage centres, where the Ganga, the Yamuna, and the Saraswati confluent, is highly meritorious. Aspirants come and live here for a full month and practice prescribed rituals and ceremonial sacrifices, which is known as "Kalpa-vas". Through the whole month there are religious discourses, kirtan, bhajan and satsang. The aspirants take full advantage of all these. They take a simple one meal a day or eat only fruit and drink some milk. Brahmins and others

deserving persons are given gifts, food, raiments, etc., in charity. Thus, they earn a lot of spiritual merit by practising religious ceremonies,

SAKATA CHAUTH

This vow falls on the fourth day of the dark half of Magha (January- February). This tithi is regarded as the birthday of Lord Ganesha. On this day Vrata is observed in the honour of Ganesha, and it ensures wisdom, trouble free life and prosperity.

The fast is observed both by men and women. After early morning bath, etc., a pitcher and Ganesha idol are installed and worshipped with sweets, and balls made of jaggery and sesame seeds (til). Moon-god and Rohini are also worshipped ritually and offered naivedya.

At night with the rising of the moon, the fast is broken. The moon is worshipped and offered water (arghya).

A story in connection with the observance of this fast reads : Once there was a righteous and judicious king. His queen Ratnavali was wise, beautiful and virtuous. They led a very happy and contented life, but unfortunately one day their kingdom was attacked, and they both had to flee to the jungle for their life. Thus deprived of their kingdom and wealth, they were living a life of misery in the forest. One day they met a Rishi. The Rishi was none else but Mahamuni Markandeya. They told him their state of woe, and how were they deprived of their kingdom.

All knowing Rishi Markandeya meditated for a while and told them that their tragedy was the result of sins accumulated in the previous birth. The king was a hunter in the previous birth and used to observe Sakata Chaturathi

Vrata, but later he stopped observing it. He became king in the present life because of the religious merits he earned by observing the vow, but now his punya has exhausted and sins are bearing fruit; and therefore all his troubles. Markandeya advised them to propitiate Ganesha to atone their past sins by observing the Sakata Chautha fast with full devotion. They did accordingly, and finally got back their lost empire and happiness.

The fourth lunar day of every fortnight is dedicated to Ganesha, and a fast may be observed on this day and the deity meditated upon and worshipped.

VASANT PANCHAMI

Vasant Panchami or Sri Panchami is the first day of the Spring Season. It marks a change in the season and heralds the period of colour, mirth, gaiety, sweetness, fragrance and novelty. Vasant Panchami is celebrated on the fifth day of the light half of Magha (January-February). This day is specially dedicated to Saraswati, the goddess of learning, wisdom, fine arts and refinement.

On this day robes, yellow in colour are worn, and sweet rice, coloured in saffron is prepared. Yellow is a royal colour, and signifies warmth, glow auspiciousness, ripeness, maturity and spirituality. Saraswati is worshipped on this day; poetical and musical gatherings are held on this day and children initiated to learn alphabets. In Bengal this day is observed as Sri Panchamif and the images of goddess Saraswati are taken out in grand and gay processions, after ceremonial worship, and then immersed in the holy Ganga or in any other stream or lake.

Saraswati is the goddess of speech, learning, fine arts and sciences; inventress of the Sanskrit language and Devnagari

cript. She is represented as of a white colour, without any superfluity of limbs, and of graceful figure, wearing a slender crescent on her brow and sitting on a lotus. The swan or peacock is her mount. She is shown playing Veena and is also called Veena Vadini. Vedas are believed to have sprung from her head. In the Vedic period she was a water deity, and a goddess of a river of the same name, now lost.

Kamadeva (Cupid), the god of love and romance, is also invoked and worshipped on this day, and feasts are arranged in his honour. On this memorable day, Shiva burnt Kamadeva to ashes, by opening his third eye, while he tried to inspire Shiva with love. But on the intervention of his wife Rati, and other gods, Shiva allowed him to be reborn. He is shown riding a parrot, carrying a bow made of sugarcane, strung with a line of humming bees, and with it shouting the five larts of desire. He is accompanied by his wife Rati and his friend Vasanta (Spring!). In Vedic times he represented creative moral force and was not so frivolous as is now.

BHISHMA ASHTAMI

Bhishma Ashtami falls on the eighth lunar day of light half of Magha (January-February). On this day Bhishma Pitamaha, the son of Shantanu and Ganga, passed away, and his soul went on its journey to the heaven.

He was called Bhishma, because he had taken a terrible vow to remain always celibate. Bhishma literally means "terrible" and "dreadful". Bhishma was renowned for his continence, wisdom, bravery and fidelity to his word. Since he did not marry, nor had any sons, it is our duty to offer him oblations and libations as his great-great-grandsons. Bhishma has rightly been designated as Pitamaha of all us. On this

day shradha is performed and libations are offered with barley
sesame, flowers and Gangajal to Bhishma. Piety observed on
this day ensures the best progeny.

The story of Bhishma is like this : Shantanu, in his ripe
age, wanted to marry a young and beautiful damsel, but her
parents did not allow it, because Bhishma (then called
Devavrata) was heir to the throne, and if she bore sons they
could not succeed. When it came to Bhishma's knowledge, he
went to the girl's parents and vowed never to marry and have
children, nor would he accept the crown. This satisfied her
parents. The damsel was Matsyagandha Satyavati, and her
father was a fisherman. Shantanu then married the damsel,
and she bore him two sons. During the great war of Maha-
bharata Bhishma took the side of the Kauravas, and he was
made commander in-chief of the vast army. He did so because
he had eaten the salt of Dhritarashtra and his sons. He did
not like to betray his salt. In the war he was unfairly wounded
from behind Shikhandin, by Arjuna. Shikhandin was an eunuch
and so Bhishma did not attack him. Bhishma was so wounded
by the rain of arrows discharged by Arjuna, as that there was
not a space of two fingers breadth left unwounded in his
whole body. When he fell from his chariot he was upheld from
the ground by the arrows and lay as on a couch of darts.

Bhishma remained on his death-bed of arrows for full fifty-
eight days, and during this period, he delivered many religious
discourses. He had attained a boon of fixing the time of his
death and departure. So, he died on this auspicious day, when
the sun had crossed to the north of the equator. Bhishma is a
great example of self-denial, devotion and fidelity.

PONGAL

Pongal is a three-day solemn festival, celebrated in South India on Sankarnti. Sankranti is a day when the sun passes from one sign of the Zodiac to another. Pongal or Makar-Sankranti marks the beginning of the sun's northern course. Then, sun passes into Capricornus from Sagittarius. It is an occasion of great rejoicing and merry-making.

Pongal festival lasts three days. The first day is Bhogi-Pongal, the Pongal of Joy. On this day people exchange visits, sweets, presents, and pass the day in all kinds of amusements. The second day is Surya-Pongal, or the Pongal of the Sun. This day is dedicated to the Sun. People get up early in the morning and first of all have their baths, etc. The married women then put rice to boil in milk on fire, and as soon as it begins to simmer, they all shout together, "Pongal ! Pongal !". The sweet thus prepared is then offered to Sun and Ganesha. A portion of it is also given to the cows, and then it is taken by the people themselves.

Again, visits are exchanged. On meeting each other they ask "Has it boiled ? To which they invariably answer 'Yes, it is boiled'. That is why this festival is called Pongal. Pongal means to boil.

The third day is Mattu Pongal or the Pongal of the Cows. On this day cows and oxen are worshipped and circumambulated. Their horns are painted in various colours, and garlands of leaves and flowers are hung round their necks. On this day the cows are allowed to graze anywhere they like, without any restraint. Pongal also marks the change of the season, and is primarily a harvest festival. India is an agricultural country and cows and oxen play a vital role in agriculture. That is why

cows and oxen are worshipped and venerated so much. Pongal also symbolizes the sharing of things with others. The newly reaped harvest is shared with friends, relatives, beasts and birds. They all partake in the cooked food and sweets.

MAKAR SANKRANT!

Makar Sankranti generally falls on January 14. It is a day of days and marks the beginning of auspicious time again. The beginning of the period, when the sun travels northwards, is considered highly favourable for auspicious activities. It is celebrated as Pongal in the South, but in the North it is observed as Makar Sankranti or Uttarayana Sankranti. On this day Hindus in thousands and thousands take a holy dip in the Ganges and other holy streams. At Ganga Sagar, where the river Ganga enters the sea, a grand fair and festival is held on this day. Devotees in large number reach the Sagar Island in boats, and bathe there at a point where Ganga meets the sea.

There, the pilgrims visit the Ashram of sage Kapil, who according to our Puranas, had burnt to ashes the sixty thousand sons of the king Sagara of Ayodhya. These sixty thousand dead princes were subsequently revived and made to ascend heaven by the sacred waters of divine Ganga, as it flowed over their ashes.

It is a very significant day, and so newly harvested corn is cooked for the first time and offered to Sun and other deities. The poor are fed and given clothes, money, etc., in charity. In the morning, after the bath, people offer libations to their dead ancestors and visit the temples. Bhishma Pitamaha waited on his couch of arrows, for a long period only for the onset of this auspicious season, before finally departing from here. In Assam

it is called Magha Bihu or Bhogali Bihu, the festival of feasts. Bonfires are lighted in Assam on this day and the round of feasts and fun goes on for about a week.

In Punjab, it is observed as Lohri, to mark the end of winter and advent of summer. Bonfires are lighted, and people dance to the tune of the drums, and sing folk songs around the fire. Sweets made of sesame, groundnuts, puffed rice, etc., are thrown into the fire, and then eaten by the people themselves. Lohri is celebrated in cities, towns and villages alike, with great enthusiasm and merry-making.

MAGHI PURNIMA

The full moon day of Magha (January-February) is known as Maghi Purnima. It is a great bathing day, and as important as Kartika Purnima for the practice of piety and devotion. On this day fast is observed and charities are done. Early in the morning, after ablutions, the dead ancestors are offered libations, and the poor are given clothes, food, money, etc. Then Brahmins are fed and given dan-dakshina according to one's means and capacity.

As already stated, Magha is one of the four most sacred months. Therefore, a bath in Ganga on this day is of high religious merit. When Ganga is not accessible, because of any reason, one may bathe in any other holy stream, river, tank or pond. Moreover, Gangajal is kept almost in all the Hindu homes. Some of it may be poured into ordinary well water, and then used for bathing.

Bathing in India is a ritual, a ceremony, a festival and a great purifying act. A bath on such auspicious day as Purnima, is all the more significant. On this day great bathing festivals are held at various places along the banks of the holy rivers like Ganga, Yamuna, Sarayu, Narmada, Tapti, Kaveri, Krishna etc.

People walk miles and miles to have a holy dip in the sea, or river or a lake on this day. A bath in the sea at Kanyakumari and Rameshwaram, is also highly prized. So is a dip at Pushkar. At Kumbhkonam, near Madras, there are great shrines of Sarangpani, Kumbeshwara and Nageshwara. There is a large sacred tank, where devotees take a holy dip on this day. It is believed that Ganga flows into this tank on this day. Once every 12 years, Kumbha Mela is also held here.

Magha Mela is held at Prayag (Allahabad) on this day, and over a million devotees including pilgrims ascetics, mendicants, nagas, priests, etc., take a holy dip here. People observe fast and charity on this occasion.

FLOAT FESTIVAL

On the full moon day of Magha (January- February), the Float Festival is celebrated at Madurai. Madurai is famous for its majestic Minakshi Temple. Minakshi means the fish-eyed goddess, and it is yet another name of Parvati. The major part of Minakshi temple was built during the reign of Tirumala Nayak (1623-55). Magha Purnima happens to be the birth day of king Tirumala Nayak.

On this day the images of Minakshi and Lord Sundareswar (Shiva) are mounted on floats and taken to Marriamman Teppakulam Sarovar, which is some kms. east of Madurai. The deities are taken round this tank on floats richly decorated and illuminated, and then are drawn back and forth across the waters of the tank to the accompaniment of music and devotional songs before being taken back to Madurai. The tank is fed by underground channels from the river Vaigai. In the centre of the tank there is an island, and on it a shrine. It was built in 1641 by King Tirumala Nayak.

The float festival is very popular and thousands of pilgrims and devotees collect here from all parts of the country on this occasion.

RAVIDAS JAYANTI

Ravi Das, popularly known as Raidas, like Valmiki belonged to a depressed class. He was born on Ravivar (Sunday), in a Harijan family, in a village near Varanasi, and was therefore, named Ravi Das. He was contemporary of another great saint Kabir.

Ravi Das was not much educated but possessed great insight and divine powers. He performed many miracles. He spent most of his time in meditation on the banks of the Ganges, in bhajan, kirtan and satsang. The rest of the time he engaged himself in making shoes. Shoe-making was his paternal profession. He composed many beautiful hymns in praise of God.

Like Kabir, Ravi Das also did a lot to bring a social change and reformation by his teachings and bhajans. That was a period of corruption, hypocrisy and religious intolerance. In the name of religion many ill-practices were in vogue. Ravi Das did his best to educate the masses by his own example and teachings. He believed in the essential unity and equality of life and in the tenet of work is also worship. He earned his bread with the sweat of his brow.

On Ravi Das Jayanti, procession bearing his portrait are taken out to the accompaniment of music through the main bazaars and streets of the city and towns. In temples dedicated to Ravi Das, his image is worshipped and prayed. At some places, feasts are also held on this occasion. Ravi Das was a great saint, and he symbolizes social unity and equality. His life and works are a great object lesson in nishkam karma-

yoga, and mutual brotherhood. In Varanasi special celebrations are being held on Ravi Das Jayanti.

SHIVARATRI

Shivaratri is both a festival and a vow to be observed. It means the "Night of Shiva" and is observed on Shiva Chaturdashi of Phalguna, that is, on the fourteenth day of the dark half of Phalguna (February-March). It is celebrated by the Hindus of all faiths and castes all over the country. The devotees spend the whole night in the four watches in meditation, japa, kirtan and reading and recitation of Shiva Mahima Stotra and Shiva Tandava Stotra. The lingam symbol of Shiva is worshipped with Gangajal, milk, curds, honey and clarified butter. Bael leaves, dhatura fruit, aak, flowers, etc., are also offered to Lord Shiva in puja. Bael leaves are very sacred and dear to Shiva.

Devotees in hundreds and thousands collect at the Shiva shrines and spend the whole night practising devotion and piety. Special puja celebrations are held at Varanasi, Tarakeswar, Baidyanath, Walkeshwar, Rameshwaram and Ujjain. At Pashupatinath, in Nepal, also, a grand celebration is held on this occasion. The devotees keep strict fast and do not take even a drop of water. As Mahadeva, he is worshipped by various gods, including Brahma and Vishnu. He can easily be pleased to grant a desired boon. He is great and powerful god and one of the Hindu Trinity. He is Mahakala and destroys and desolves everything into nothingness, but he, as Shankara, also resorts and reproduces that which has been destroyed and dissolved. His symbol of phallus symbolizes this reproductive power. As a Mohayogi, the great ascetic, he combines in himself the highest perfection of austre penance and abstract meditation. In this form he is a naked ascetic, Digambara, "clothed with the elements". He is also called

Chandrashekha, "moon-crested"; Gangadhara, "bearer of Ganga"; Girisha, "mountain lord"; Kala, 'time'; Maha-kala, "great time", Pashupati, "Lord of the beasts", Vishwanath, "Lord of the Universe"; etc.

A very interesting story is told by the devotees on this occasion to underline the singnificance of the vow observed on this day. Once, there was a hunter called Suswar. He lived near Varanasi. He earned his livelihood by killing and selling birds and beasts. One day he went on a hunting expedition, but was overtaken by darkness and could not return home. The forest was dense and full of terrible beasts of prey. For protection he climbed up a bael tree for the night. During the course of the night, he suffered the pangs of hunger and thirst on the one hand, on the other he was very much worried about his dear wife, children and old mother at home, who had been waiting anxiously for his return.

In his great anxiety, he wept and began to pluck the bael leaves and dropped them down on the ground. Under the tree there was a Shiva-linga, and that night was Shivaratri. The hunter's worship, though performed unwittingly, highly pleased Shiva. Therefore, the hunter after his death, got a place in the blissful abode of Lord Shiva, and after ages was reborn as a king, named Chitrabhanu. The king observed Shivaratri and did great penance on that day.

AMALAKA EKADASHI

The Hindus have worshipful attitude towards all, whether they be trees or beasts, rivers or deities, animate or inanimate things, because the one Universal Spirit pervades all. The Omnipresent is hiding in everything. Everything is in him. He dwells in all, the witness, the sentient, all alone and devoid of attributes.

It is this conception of God or Reality that underlies the worship of trees. On Amalka Ekadashi, the Amla tree (*Emlica Officinalis*) is worshipped. This day is observed on the eleventh day of the light half of Phalguna. Hari lives in this tree as well. India is an agricultural country, and the vital role of the trees in our life is all too evident.

After the morning ablutions, etc., Amalaka tree is ceremonially bathed and watered, and then worshipped. Fast is observed on this day and Brahmins given gifts, etc. From the piety observed on this day flows happiness, prosperity and beatitude. It also marks the beginning of Holi festival. Generally Holi festival is being observed from Vasant Panchami, but from Amalka Ekadashi people start splashing coloured water on one another.

HOLI

Holi is one of the four most popular festivals observed by all without any distinction of caste, creed, status or sex. It is observed on the full moon night of Phalguna. It marks the end of winter and the advent of spring season. It is a two-day festival. On the first night bonefire is lighted in the evening or night. Before being lit, it is worshipped and offered water and grains, then people go round it to perform pradikshna. Children make merry, womenfolk sing gay songs and adults also sing phag to the accompaniment of cymbals and drums. People enjoy fun and like to play practical jokes on one another.

The next day, people amuse themselves by splashing coloured water and throwing coloured powder on their friends, relatives, neighbours and even passersby. Noisy and colourful processions are taken out through the bazaars and streets. In refined people it is characterized by songs, music, floral decoration and splashing of perfumed water. Sweets and visits are exchanged and cold drinks prepared at home, are served liberally. People forget all enmity and embrace each other, with

warmth and love, and renew their friendship. New corn is baked and eaten on this day for the first time in the season.

There are several myths about the origin of the festival of Holi. According to one Puranic myth, there was a great demon Hiranyakasipu. He conquered all the three worlds and made the gods to serve him. He forbade practice of piety and worship of God, and instead declared himself God. People were made to worship him at the point of sword. But his son Prahlad, a mere child, a noble and great soul, was a great devotee of Vishnu and always chanted his name and sang his glories. It infuriated his demon father and he ordered "Let this evil-soul child be killed".

To kill Prahlad several fatal means were adopted, but none succeeded. At last a big fire was lighted and Prahlad was made to sit in her aunt Holika's lap and she then jumped into the fire. Holika claimed immunity from fire, but by the grace of God, Prahlad came out of the fire alive and unscathed but his aunt had died. The burning of Holi commemorates this event. It symbolizes the triumph of good over evil.

DOL PURNIMA

In Bengal Holi is celebrated as Dol Purnima. This festival is dedicated to Sri Krishna. On this auspicious day, an image of Krishna, richly adorned and besmeared with coloured powder, is taken out in a procession, in a swinging palanquin, decorated with flowers, leaves, coloured clothes and papers. The procession proceeds forward to the accompaniment of music, blaring of conch shells, trumpets and shouts of Jai (victory).

Dol Purnima becomes all the more significant, because this is also the birthday of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1485-1533). He was a great Vaishnava saint, who popularized modern

sankirtana. He elevated the passion of Radha and Krishna to a high spiritual plane. He underlined emotional at the cost of the ceremonial side of devotion. Followers of Chaitanya School of Vaishnavism, believe Chaitanya himself as a manifestation of Krishna. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu believed that the essence of sadhana is always the loving remembrance of Hari,

Special Vows and Observances

INDIA itself is a gigantic temple and eternal festival. Spiritualism and religion in the form of fasts, festivals and feasts overflows all the boundaries of caste, colour, creed, communities and conventions. They establish a new hierarchy, ever enriched by the waters of living faith. Religion in this form always remains enshrined in the hearts of men. India has to offer a fantastic fare of fasts, festivals and pilgrimages. They are deeply rooted in religion, and celebrate mythological events connected with gods and goddesses and great men of religion, but they are basically social in which people of all faiths can participate.

Such events as fasts, festivals and fairs are the occasions for prayer, practice of devotion and piety, thanksgiving, bhajans, kirtans and also of merry-making, feasts, music, dance, shopping, outing and relaxation, in which men and women, young and old, all participate in gay abandon. Here below are given some special fairs, fasts and observances.

KUMBHA PARVA

Kumbha means a pitcher or a water pot. In the beginning of the creation, the gods under the curse of Rishi Durvasa, were defeated and turned out of their abode heaven by the Durvasa. They went to Vishnu and sought his help. He advised them to churn the ocean for Amrit or elixir. When the Amrit Kumbha (pitcher of nectar) appeared, there ensued a scramble between the gods and the demons, and some of its contents splashed out and fell at four places.

These four places are Hardwar or Haridwar, Prayaga (Allahabad), Ujjain and Nasik. Now, Kumbha Parva or Mela is held every 12 year in rotation at these places. It is called Purana Kumbha, and the one held every six years, after the full ones, is called the Ardha Kumbha (half Kumbha). At Hardwar, it lasts for about a month and half in Phalgun-Chaitra, when the sun passes to Aries, and Jupiter, is in Aquarius. At Prayag, it is held in Magh (January-February), when Jupiter is in Aries, and the sun and the moon in Capricorn. The Ujjain Kumbha is held in Kartika (October-November), when these planets are in Libra. It is held on the banks of the River Shipra. At Nasik it is held on the banks of Godawari, in Shravana (July-August), when these planets are in Cancer. These kumbha melas terminate with the final bath on the new moon day.

Kumbha Fair is the most magnificent bathing festival ever held in the world. Millions of people, which include saints, sanyasis, rishi-munis, priests, naga sadhus, mahants and milling crowds from all parts of the country, participate in it. Sometimes, the rush of devotees is so unmanageable that in spite of great preparations for several months ahead, there is a stampede, and the result is a mass tragedy. In the recent Kumbha Fair, held at Haridwar on March-April 1986, at least 100 pilgrims died and scores were injured. And it was not for the first time. The toll was much larger in 1795, when 500 persons died and it was the largest in 1760 when as many as 18 000 pilgrims are said to have perished.

Because the Jupiter, the Sun and the Moon had helped in protecting the Amrit Kumbha from being snatched by the demons, the position of these three planets determine the principal bathing days. During Kumbha Fairs, there are continuous recitation and reading of scriptures, Epics and Puranas.

There are religious discourses; food, clothes, money and other gifts are given liberally to the needy, saints and sadhus. There are endless processions of mahantas in richly decorated swinging palanquins, of ash-smeared naga (naked) sadhus in endless file, and others with their matted locks, either dangling loose around their heads or tied into a high knot above. A holy dip during Kumbha Parva is highly meritorious, as it destroys all sins. The ancient Hindu scriptures wax eloquent in praise of these fairs. These reflect the true soul of India, the glory and greatness that India was, and still is, and the living faith enshrined in the hearts of millions and millions of Hindus.

THE ECLIPSE

The time of eclipse is an occasion when the devotees take bath in Ganga or other sacred streams, pools, or tanks and observe piety and devotion. They offer libations to the souls of their departed ancestors and offer water to the Sun and the Moon. At Kurukshetra, the place of the famous Mahabharata war, people in thousands gather to have a holy dip in the sacred pool. It was here that Lord Krishna delivered the message of Gita to Arjuna.

A bath taken during the eclipse, and the charities and devotion practised on this occasion purify the mind and soul of the aspirants. All other activities are suspended during an eclipse, cows, money, clothes, grains, etc., are given in charity to the poor and needy, brahmins and others. Japa and Kirtans are done, and the mantras or holy formulae are repeated to tap the subtle forces contained in them. Until and unless the sun and the moon are clear, neither food nor water is taken.

The eclipse again takes us back to the beginning of creation. When the milky ocean was being churned to obtain nectar. The

churning went on until finally god Dhanvantari appeared, carrying a pitcher full of nectar. It cheered all the gods and demons. But then, the demons stole the nectar-jar. Whereupon, Vishnu fooled them with an illusion. Assuming the form of a beautiful woman or Mohini, Vishnu took the jar and the cup from the Daityas and Danavas and gave it to the gods. At this Indra and other gods drank the nectar and became immortal and invincible. The gods then defeated the demons and regained their lost heaven. The demons then fled and entered the nether world.

But in the mean while, Rahu, the cause of eclipse, assumed a disguise, and insinuating himself amongst deities, drank some of the nectar. The Sun and the Moon detected it and informed Vishnu, who cut off his head and two of his arms with his discus, but, as he had already drunk the nectar, he did not die. Thus, his head came to be known as Rahu, and the trunk as Ketu. He wreaks vengeance on the sun and the moon for his betrayal, and swallows them, and thus causes the eclipse. He rushes from the moon to the sun, and then back again from the sun to the moon to swallow them. He had four hands and his lower part ended in a tail.

On the occasion of the eclipse the widows, the sadhus, the mendicants and recluses observe strict fast; the people in general are prohibited from sleeping, going to the toilet and touching the image of a deity. Bhajan, kirtan, jap, meditation, recitation of scriptures, bathing, charity, libation to the dead ancestors, etc., are highly recommended during the eclipse.

MAL-MAS

Mal-mas is also called Adhikmas or Purushottam-mas. It is an inter-calated 13th month. The month in which the sun does not move from one position or sign into the other, is called

hal-mas. It occurs after every 32 month 15 days and 4 natus. And the moon in which the sun passes into another signs or positions twice is known as kshaya-mas. First it occurs after 141 years and then after 19 years.

During Mal-mas religious ceremonies are prohibited. The customs observed and the charities practised during Mal-mas are said to be highly meritorious. They destroy sins. During Mal-mas daily ghee, grains and jaggery should be given to the Brahmins in charity. In Mal-mas marriages are not performed, but libations and oblations are specially offered to the dead ancestors and Pretas (ghosts). When Mal-mas occurs either in the month of Vaishakha, or Jyaishtha or Ashad, it is considered to be inauspicious. In Chaitra it is neither auspicious nor inauspicious. In the rest of the months it is always good. During Mal-mas a grand fair is held at Rajgriha, once the capital of Magadha, in Bihar. According to Purnas at this time 33 crore gods and goddesses descend here, and it turns the place into the most sacred place and centre of pilgrimage on the earth.

SATYANARAYANA VRATA

This Vrata can be observed either on Sankranti, Ekadashi or Navasya or Puranmasi. But in Northern India, it is generally observed on the full moon day (Puranmasi) of every month. Satyanarayana or Satyadeva means the Lord of Truth, and is another name of Vishnu. The merits obtained by observing this Vrata are many. It destroys all sins and evils, and ensures peace of mind, bliss, prosperity, happy relations, health and truthfulness. In the Kaliyuga, worship of Lord Satyanarayana with devotion, is like the veritable wishfulfilling cow. There are many interesting legends in connection with the observance of this fast.

Once Davarishi Narada happened to visit the earth, the Mrityuloka. He was very much distressed to find the people there in misery, ill health and poverty. He wanted to relieve the sufferings of the mankind, but could not find out any way. He went to Satyaloka and told all about it to Bhagwan Satyanarayana. Lord Narayana advised Narada to go on the earth again to tell the people to observe Satyanarayana fast on the day of Purnima or Ekadashi, Amavasya or Sankranti. The evils, sins and suffering would vanish instantly and prosperity, happiness and bliss would be their sure lot, the Lord told Narada.

Narada returned to the earth and preached the message of Satyanarayana Vrata. People did accordingly. They observed strict fast, listened to the story of Satyanarayana, sang his praises and meditated on him, and had all their desires fulfilled.

On this auspicious day, the aspirants should get up early in the morning, after taking bath they should pray and worship Suryanarayana first of all, and thereafter invoke Satyanarayana. They should make a small pavilion with plaintain trunk, flowers, leaves, etc. and install therein an image or picture of Satyanarayana. Then, the Lord should be ritually worshipped with camphor, fruits, lamps, incense water, naivedya, betel leaves, etc., and the story of the vrata should be heard from a Brahmin. The Brahmin should be given gifts of grain, fruit, sweetmeats, money, etc. and then prasad should be distributed. And finally in the afternoon the fast should be broken.

There is another story which very beautifully underlines the spiritual significance of observing a vow on this day. There was a very poor Brahmin. He lived on alms and spent days in misery. One day Lord Satyanarayana took pity on

appeared before him in the guise of a Pandit or learned Brahmin. Lord ordained him to observe the Satyanarayana Vrata. The next day was Puranmasi. He prepared a simple prasad of baked flour and sugar, and after worshipping Narayana with full devotion and faith, distributed the prasad, and partook of it and prospered.

On the next Puranmasi, he celebrated the fast on a grand scale. A poor wood-cutter chanced to pass by his house. The poor wood-cutter heard the Satyanarayana katkha, ate the prasad, and being inspired observed the vow himself along with his wife and children, with complete devotion and piety proper for the occasion. Consequently, he became very rich, enjoyed all the joys of life and after death attained the blissful abode of Lord Hari, the Satyaloka.

Satyanarayana vrata is the easiest and most inexpensive way of self-purification and self-surrender at the lotus feet of Hari. One who observes it with full devotion and faith is sure to attain his heart's desire. Such a celebration creates healthy and pure vibrations and purges the heart of all dross and evils.

PRADOSHA VRATA

Pradosha means the dusk of the early night or evening tide. This vow is observed in the evening twilight, and so it is called Pradosha Vrata. It is observed on the 13th day of each lunar fortnight. It is practised to propitiate Lord Shiva, in order to obtain his blessings and boons leading to fulfilment of one's cherished desires and spiritual upliftment. The evening tide, when the sun sets and the night approaches, is the best time to worship Shiva.

A thing practised at an opportune moment is likely to bear the best possible results. That is why there is so much emphasis on observing rituals, ceremonies, vows, etc., on a given day at

a given hour. Our seers have ordained Pradosha vow to be practised in the evening, because it is most efficacious then. The gods themselves approached Lord Shiva in the most propitious moments of Pradosha to seek succor in the hour of distress, when they were being harassed and tormented by the Danavas and Daityas. And they were quite successful in achieving Mahadeva's favours and blessings.

An aspirant should get up early at dawn on Pradosha day, and having finished his daily and regular ablutions, etc., he should invoke Shiva and meditate on him. On that day he should not eat anything. Then, again at time of Pradosha, he should bathe and purify and put on clean clothes and sit for ritual worship in a sanctified place. He should sit preferable on a seat of kusha grass, facing east, but never facing west or south. Then, he should offer shodashopachar puja (16 acts of homage) to Shiva with seasonal flowers, bael leaves, fruit, lamp, incense, etc.

To offer even one such puja Pradosha equals scores of other pujas in merit. To light even a single ghee lamp at such auspicious moments, is highly rewarding. Along with Shiva, Parvati, Ganesh, Kartikeya and the Nandi Bull are also worshipped and Maha Mrityunjaya Mantra is repeated 108 times. The priest and Brahmin should be given clothes, grains, a pitcher and money at the conclusion of the ceremony. In breaking the fast only light meal, consisting of fruits, curds, sweets, etc., should be taken. Night vigil should be kept and Pradosha-stotra from the Skanda Purana should be read and recited.

This fast is highly praised by the Puranas, and is of great religious merit. Those who practice it with unflinching faith and devotion are bound to possess wealth, health, happiness and peace of mind. When Pradosha falls on either Monday, Saturday or Sunday, it becomes all the more propitious.

SOMVAR VRATA

Somvar (Monday) fast is observed to propitiate Shiva and Parvati. The fast is terminated in the late afternoon and either fruits are taken or food eaten, but only once. The Panchakshara Mantra "Om Namah Shivaya" should be repeated on this day. This japa is highly rewarding. Some people observe it continuously for sixteen Mondays, and then terminate it with elaborate ritual and ceremony. The gift of a cow with its calf given to Brahmin on this occasion, is regarded highly meritorious.

During the Chaitra month, Somvar vows are observed to please Jagannath, the Lord of Universe. Generally a person who has been at least once to Jagannathpuri, is entitled to observe such a vow, but even if any one of the members of his family has been on a pilgrimage to Jagannath, can undertake it. Lord Jagannath is ritually worshipped in the late afternoon and naivedya offered. After the ritual, prashad is distributed and dan-dakshina is given to the priest, and only then food is taken.

MANGALVAR VRATA

It is a popular fast, and is observed to propitiate Mahavir Hanuman, who rendered great service to Lord Rama. He acted as his spy and fought most valiantly. He helped in restoring Lakshmana to life by bringing medicinal herbs from the Himalayas. He accompanied Rama to Ayodhya and there he received from him the boon of perpetual life and youth. There is no other deity so helpful in time of difficulty.

On this day strict fast is kept, and Hanuman is worshipped with sweets and fruits, and Hanuman Chalisa is read and recited. A coat of vermillion mixed in ghee is also applied on this day on the idols of Hanuman. After puja, prashed of sweets is distributed and only then fast is broken. Only one meal is taken on

this day and that too without salt at all. On Tuesday fairs are held at many places near the Hanuman shrines. From Mangalvar vrata flows success, happiness, strength, both physical and moral, and quick recovery from illness. It also helps in overcoming the enemies.

SHUKRAVAR VRATA

This vow is observed in many forms and for many benefits. It may be observed for the propitiation of the planet Shukra, and to ensure longevity of the son, peace of mind and harmony in the family. It is also observed in the honour of goddess of wealth Lakshmi. Lakshmi is worshipped with white flowers, white raiments and naivedya prepared with ghee and sugar. In Bhavishya Purana, this vow is described in detail.

Now-a-days, it is a very popular fast, and is generally observed by the ladies to please the goddess Santoshi Mata. Santoshi Ma is another form of Parvati or Durga. Durga is thousand-named. She is Das-Bhuja, ten armed; Singha-Vahini, rides a lion; Mahisha-mardini, destroyer of demon Mahisha; Kali, the black; Kanyakumari, the youthful virgin; Ambika, the mother; Sarvamangla, always auspicious; and so on.

As the Shakti or female energy of Shiva, she is both fierce and mild. As Santoshi Ma she is mild and ever auspicious. On this day strict fast is observed and jagaran is done during night, and devotees sing her praises and glories in an assembly to the tune of music. In the morning prashad is distributed after final worship. Some devotees go to Vaishno Devi shrine in Jammu, after observing the vow of Friday. But it depends on one's inclination, means and capacity. Santoshi Mata vrata can be observed individually without much show and external exhibition. A vrata is actually a matter of faith and devotion and hardly requires any exhibitionism.

Non-Hindu Fasts and Festivals

INDIA offers a unique example of unity in diversity and variety. The variety of faiths and religions found in the country is overwhelming, and yet it wonderfully reflects the oneness of human spirit. These different faiths and their manifestations are just like various petals of a single flower. India is like a federation of various faiths. In Hinduism itself there are scores of sects and cults. Truth is one, sages call it by various names. In the following pages are given some festivals, celebrations, feasts and fests, which may be called the Non-Hindu for the sake of convenience; but they are essentially Indian, and help us in understanding the rich cultural heritage of India.

CHRISTMAS

The festival of Christmas or the birth anniversary of Jesus Christ is celebrated with great cheer and enthusiasm all over India by the Christians. It falls on December 25 (Pausha) every year. People in their best clothes attend the special services of midnight. It is a week long festival of feasting, rejoicing, greetings and giving and receiving gifts.

The celebrations start on Christmas eve with carole singing, visiting friends and relations till late in the night. On the final day, a midnight mass followed by the pealing of the church bells, ushers in the New Year. In big cities and towns processions are taken out with tableaus depicting the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, and other Christian saints. At some places special stalls are set up and fairs are held. Christians beautifully decorate their houses, shops, establishments, hospitals, schools and churches and illuminate them. They erect Christmas trees and exchange greetings around it. The Roman Catholics do not raise these trees.

Christmas is also an occasion of family reunion. The members of the family living and working at distances and different places join together in merry-making at one place and enjoy themselves. In India it is a general holiday.

The Christians have also contributed to the religious and cultural variety and richness of India. Perhaps the first Christians to land here were those who fled persecution from Persia and Mesopotamia in the middle of the fourth century and landed at Malabar Coast. Like the Jews, they also found a ready asylum here. Thus, the roots of Christianity in India are older than that of Islam. Hindus also take part with great cheer in Christian celebrations with their Christian friends and fellow workers.

NEW YEAR'S DAY

It is an annual festival celebrated all over India on 1st of January with great social and religious fervour. It marks the end of the old and the beginning of the New Year. Actually the celebrations start right from the eve of 24th December and continue upto 1st January of the New Year. New Year Day is celebrated primarily by the urban upper and middle class people. They enjoy it with gay abandon. Greetings and good wishes are exchanged, sweets are distributed, and people welcome one another by shaking hands and wishing a "Very Happy New Year". Greeting cards are sent to friends, relatives and well-wishers, who happen to live at distant places.

The day starts with special services in the churches, and then begins a round of never-ending festivity, merry-making, dancing, singing and feasting. At mid-night when the new year is ushered in, with the striking of 12, people in large number come out in the streets and market places and welcome the New Year with fun and frolic, dance and songs. That night the hotels are fully booked and people

entertain themselves and their friends with sumptuous dishes.

It is also an occasion of thanks giving and prayer to God for the happy time spent last year. God is prayed for more happy new year, and good wishes are either given orally or sent by post to the friends, relations and others for the new year. Children are given gifts and money. At some places fairs are held and shops, stalls, etc., set up for the occasion.

GOOD FRIDAY

Good Friday is celebrated in April-May by the Christians in India to commemorate the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Lord Christ sacrificed himself on the cross for the sake of entire humanity. On this day Christians mourn Christ's death and observe strict fast, and attend the services in the churches.

St. Luke's Gospel describes Christ's Crucification in the following words :

"Then the whole company of them arose and brought him before Pilate. And they began to accuse him saying, "We found this man perverting our nation, and forbidding us to give tribute to Caesar, and saying that he himself is Christ a king".....Pilate then said to them, ".....Behold nothing deserving death has been done by him, I will therefore chastise him and release him".

But they all cried out together "Crucify him!" They led him away. Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. And Jesus said, "Father forgive them; for they know not what they do". It was now about the sixth hour and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun's light failed, and the curtain of the temple was torn into two. Then Jesus crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed the last.

Christians mourn on Good Friday and pray to express their love, faith and deep devotion in Jesus Christ. Some Christians wear black clothes to symbolize mourning and take out a procession with an image of Jesus Christ and go to the burial place.

EASTER

Easter marks the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a day of great rejoicing and merry-making. It is celebrated in March-April between 22nd March and 25th April on the Sunday following the full moon. Easter ceremonies correspond to Passover, the Jewish festival. It symbolizes the ultimate victory of good over evil. Feasts are given, sweets exchanged and processions taken out on this occasion. Edible artificial and hard-boiled eggs are given on Easter as gifts.

There was a man named Joseph, a good righteous man. He went to the Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then he took it down and wrapped it in a-linen shroud and laid him in rock-hewn tomb, where no one had ever yet been laid. The women who had come with him followed, then they returned and prepared spices and ointments.

On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices which they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body, while they were perplexed about it, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel, and as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? Remember how he told you, that the son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful man, and be crucified, and on the third day rise".

Thus describes the Bible, the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Christians pray and thank Christ, the saviour of whole humanity on the occasion.

MUHARRAM

Muharram is a Muslim festival of mourning observed in the first month of the Hijri Year. The Shia community in particular celebrate it with great fervour and enthusiasm. Muslims, in general, observe fast, offer prayers, recite fatihas, and sing elegies in homage to the martyrs during the celebrations. On the final day Tajias are taken out in grand processions, accompanied by brass bands and bagpipes playing sad tunes and the beating of the big drums that add to the solemnity of the occasion. The Tajias represent the Mausoleum of Hazrat Imam Hussain. The procession terminates at Karbala, where the Tajias are ceremonially buried. The alam or standard of Imam Hussain is also carried in the procession.

On the way Tajias are offered incense, etc., as the procession makes periodic halts and different groups perform acrobatics, and battle scenes of Karbala are enacted by the people. The mourners also beat their breasts in mourning to the tune of the beating drums and the cries of "Hai Hussain!"

The sad celebration is observed with great passion at places like Lucknow, Delhi, Agra and Jaipur, and big mourning processions are taken out. Hazrat Imam Hussain was the second son of Fatimah, the prophet's daughter. He was brutally murdered along with his whole family by the evil-souled Yazid at Karbala in Mecca. Imam Hussain died fighting bravely.

After the burial or immersion of the Tajias at Karbala, the devotees return home, break their fast and give food, clothes, money, etc., to the poor, needy and sick in charity. In foreign countries Tajia's are not taken out in procession. They observe this day of Martyrdom in peace and silence. It is believed that Taimurlang introduced the Tajias in India.

ID-UL-ZUHA

It is one of the grandest Muslim fastivals, and is also known as Bakrid. It falls on the 10th day of the Muslim month Zil-Hijja. There is an interesting story about the celebration. One, Hazrat Ibrahim was ordered by Allah in a dream to sacrifice his dearest thing. To Ibrahim his son was the dearest. So, he decided to sacrifice his son on the altar of Allah. He sought the permission of the members of the family and blind-folded himself so that at the time of sacrifice his love for the son may not deter him from the act. He struck with his sword, but when he removed the fold from his eyes, to his great pleasure and surprise, he found that he had sacrificed a ram instead of his son. Since, then a ram, or goat or a camel is sacrificed and distributed among the neighbours and relatives.

The sacrifice of a ram or goat also symbolizes that man's position in the creation is far more high than any beast, and any sacrifice, however great, is a small thing for the sake of religion and Allah. The sacrificial ram or goat is reared with great care and is kept quite healthy and fat. And the man who does the sacrifice must be a man of a character and deeply religious.

On Bakrid, the Muslims go to the mosques in the morning to offer prayers to Allah, and then sacrifice the animal at home. The cooked meat is partaken by the friends and relations. The poor, needy and sick are given money, clothes, etc., in charity on this day. Children also get money to spend, and gifts from their elders. People embrace one another out of sheer joy and greet each other. Hindus also participate in it and offer their good wishes to their Muslim friends and well-wishers.

MILAD-UN-NABI

The festival of Miald-un-Nabi, or Bara Wafat is celebrated with eclat and enthusiasm by the Muslims all over the country.

It commemorates the birthday of Hazrat Mohammad and falls on the twelfth day of Rabi-ul-Awwal month. Prophet Mohammad was born in 571 A.D. on 12th April at Mecca in Arabia. Abdulla was his father and Amina his mother. Khadiza was Mohammad's wife. That was the period of moral chaos and great corruption. Mohammad spent his time in prayer and meditation in seclusion. He led the people on the path of morality and true religion.

On the day of Milad the Prophet's teachings are repeated, the holy Koran is read and recited and religious meetings are organized in the mosques. The devotees keep night vigil spend their time in namaz and reading of Koran. They invite friends and relatives to feast, and offer food, clothing money, etc., to the poor.

RAMZAN AND ID-UL-FITR

It is believed that God conveyed the message of Koran to Hazrat Mohammad through Gabriel in the days of Ramzan. The whole month of Ramzan is sacred. All through this month the devout Muslims keep strict fast during the day. After sunset, namaz is offered and then fast is broken. To announce the time of breaking fast, at some places, cannons are fired. They get up at dawn and take up light refreshment and then again the fast begins. The fast continues for about a month. It begins with the new moon and terminates with the next new moon.

The month following Ramzan is called Shawwal. On the first of Shawwal is celebrated Id-ul-fitr. It is a festival of great cheer, rejoicing and festivity. Throughout India it is observed with great enthusiasm, fervour and preparation. On this day people wear new and best clothes, shoes and offer mass namaz in Idgah and other mosques. After namaz there is a religious lecture from Imam and then they greet and embrace one another warmly. Hindus also greet and embrace their Muslim friends in fraternal spirit.

The whole day of Id is spent in festivity and exchange of sweets, good wishes and visits. Sewayyan, a sweet dish is specially prepared on this occasion and distributed among friends, neighbours and relatives. It is a great social and religious Muslim festival and the poor and needy are given money, food, clothes, etc., in charity. Muslim women also celebrate it with great zest and enthusiasm. They wear their fineries, jewellery and apply henna on their feet and hands. On meeting one another the Muslims on this day greet by saying, "Id mubarak !".

JAMSHED NAVAROZ

Jamshed Navroz is a Parsi festival of New Year, which is observed annually in the month of March. It is also known as Patati or the Day of Repentence. They visit their Fire Temples and offer prayers and sandal-wood, and beg pardon for the misdeeds committed during the last year knowingly or unknowingly. On this festive day they exchange greetings, goodwishes, visits and presents. This is also a day of charity, and so they give food, money, clothes, etc., to the sick, needy and the poor.

The Parsi New Year festival dates back to the reign of Emperor Jamshed in Persia, where their ancestors lived. But later on they fled to India because of religious persecution. They took shelter here in India with their fire of Ahura-Mazda a millennium ago. The Parsis are an industrious and noble community. Their number is not great, but their contribution to the growth and development of India is really great. They are friendly with all, and have always been true to their great guru Zaruthusht. They are keeping the flame of truth still alive which was lit ages ago in Iran by him.



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